

Have Happened by Cortexikid

Category: Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Humor, Romance

Language: English

Characters: Jonathan B., Nancy W., Steve H.

Status: Completed

Published: 2017-01-29 07:58:10

Updated: 2017-10-24 07:48:31

Packaged: 2019-12-17 04:34:47

Rating: T

Chapters: 7

Words: 44,968

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Nancy stared at Steve, then Jonathan and back again before muttering, "you know, I think I liked it better when you two were punching each other." Steve Harrington/Nancy Wheeler/Jonathan Byers. COMPLETE.

1. Chapter One: The Awakening

Have Happened

By Cortexikid

Chapter One: The Awakening

So funny story, this was not supposed to be in Steve's POV at all. And was only supposed to be like 2000 words tops. But when I sat down to tackle the prompt that the wonderful pantlesshero sent me, it just happened this way. So, yeah. Enjoy!

I feel so unsure as I take your hand and lead you to the dance floor...

"Come on, Nance. Sit down."

"What is this?" she asked, her face pinched as the crooning continued softly in the background.

Steve's grin widened at Nancy's tone, tilting his head back to lay against his couch as she shifted closer to him, winding her arm across to rest on his abdomen, her head falling to his shoulder.

"It's the new George Michael song. You don't like it?"

He reached out to touch the little wrinkle that had formed between her eyebrows, his grin softening as she rolled her eyes at him.

It had been seven months since...well, everything. Faceless monsters and alternate universes, kids coming back from the dead and others staying that way. It had been seven months since he and Nancy started going steady and he told Tommy H and Carol what he really thought of them. It had been seven months since he bought Jonathan Byers a new camera and everything...changed.

He had gotten it the same day he wiped those red letters off the movie theatre. He had been walking by Earl's Electronics and there it was, right in the window. He stood on the sidewalk, staring at it for a solid minute before his feet unglued themselves and carried him into

the store. He finally gave it to Nancy four days before Christmas Eve. That was what really started all...this.

"Why don't you just give it to him?" she had asked, head tilted, hands on her hips.

"Come on, Nance, you know he won't take it from me."

She did know that. So did he. So she wrapped it up all nice and placed it under the mini tree in her bedroom where it sat until she skipped down the stairs and handed it to Jonathan when he came to pick up Will. Steve had listened silently from his spot on the Wheeler's couch ignoring Mr Wheeler's snores and heart hammering in his chest. He couldn't fathom why he felt so...damn it, not nervous but...Nancy would know the exact word, but no way in hell he was gonna ask her.

Jonathan hadn't opened it then and there and for that, Steve was relieved but also a little...disappointed? Was that disappointment? No. Maybe. He had no idea. As he heard Nancy's footsteps approach, he schooled his face into something more neutral.

When she sat down, he wrapped an arm around her shoulder and smiled, "did you give it to him?"

"Yeah..."

As she turned away, he hid a small smile in her hair and forced himself to look back at the TV, a pool of warmth rising from his stomach and spreading across his chest, it a nice balm to the weird maybe disappointment that had settled under his skin.

Jonathan would like the camera.

That was what mattered.

Steve pulled his jacket closer to him as the cold January air wafted through the doors of Hawkins High School. It was ass o'clock, far too early for any self-respecting teenager to be vertical and yet here he was, opening his locker and wishing he stopped for coffee before getting this shit-show on the road.

"Just take those old records off the shelf," he sang quietly to himself as he took out his books and shoved them into his bag, "I'll sit and listen to them by myself. Today's music ain't got the same soul, I like that old time—"

"I don't see it."

"Holy shit!" Steve jumped, whirling around in alarm at the sudden voice from behind him.

Jonathan Byers, if he had have been the type, would have smirked a little at Steve's deer-in-headlights impression, he was sure. But seen as he wasn't, he just stood there in the middle of the hallway and stared, hands in his pockets.

"Jesus Christ, Byers. Wear a damn bell or somethin'," Steve grumbled, his cheeks a little flushed as his heart-beat began to slow.

"Sorry," Jonathan murmured, not sounding sorry at all.

The two stared at each other for a moment, before Steve had to break eye contact, clearing his throat loudly, "you don't see what?"

Jonathan continued to stare at him, his dark eyes pensive as they raked over his face.

Steve forced himself to stand still and not fidget.

He would not fidget, dammit.

"I heard Carol say once that you look like that guy from Risky Business..." he began before shrugging, "I don't see it."

A spike of annoyance flowed through Steve's veins.

"Okay, thanks for the observation, Byers," he deadpanned, turning back to his locker.

It only took a moment or two for him to realise that the other boy was still standing behind him. Slowly he turned back around, eyebrow quirked as he asked lowly, "was there uh...did you want..."

He left the questions hanging, not really sure what the hell was happening.

It was too damn early.

Shifting from foot to foot, it seemed it was Byers' turn to stare at the floor as he muttered something far too low for Steve to hear.

Leaning forward slightly, brow furrowed, he asked, "what?"

A look of irritation flashed in the other boy's face for a split second before he ground out, his voice still barely above a whisper, "I just wanted to say thanks..."

Neither had to clarify what for.

Steve briefly entertained the idea of denying he had any part in the shiny, new camera hanging around Byers' neck but something stopped him. He merely nodded, shoving his hands in his pockets, unconsciously mirroring the other boy, fighting the urge to hunch his shoulders. Another silence befell them before Jonathan decided that he had done what he came to do and turned on his heel, making his way down the hallway, back to the dark room.

"Hey Byers!"

The words left his mouth before Steve knew what was happening.

Jonathan turned on the spot, head tilted.

"Uh..."

What the hell are you doing, Harrington?

"Take any good pictures lately?"

A frown marred Byers' face, no doubt wondering what the hell Steve's angle was.

Steve was wondering that himself.

His feet moved several steps forward on their own accord (they had

been doing that a lot lately), his mouth failing to stop words from tumbling from his lips, "Nance she...she says you're a good photographer. Great, even."

Seriously, dude. What the fuck are you doing?

Jonathan was clearly asking himself that too if his expression was any indication. Sure, they had killed a giant, faceless monster together. But monster-murdering did not small-talk experts make.

"She told you that?" Byers asked eventually in that annoyingly quiet way of his and Steve definitely didn't imagine the flicker of hope in his gaze.

He fought the urge to roll his eyes.

"Yeah, she did. And you know Nance, she doesn't impress easily," he shrugged, looking around the empty hallway before forcing himself to meet his gaze, "can I see some?"

Thinking back, he had no idea what compelled him to ask that. It was just something about that camera, the one that he had bought, the one currently still hanging around Byers' neck, silently taunting him. He couldn't help but be curious about what it may have captured, what moment it forever froze in a world of eternal black and white.

He couldn't stop his mind from casting back to the photographs he had already seen, the ones of the party, the ones he had torn up right before he smashed—and there was the fresh bout of guilt, injecting itself directly into his chest, right on time.

Meanwhile, Jonathan thankfully seemed too busy internally battling with himself to notice his turmoil. After a beat or two, the photographer shrugged, jerking his head. Without waiting to see if Steve was following him, he turned and continued his trek down the hallway.

Steve absolutely did not nearly trip over his own feet in his haste to catch up.

The thing about dark rooms was that they were, as the name implies, dark as hell. Well, Steve couldn't comment on how dark hell was, but

it was definitely darker than most things. Coal, night, faceless monsters that want to eat you alive...

He barely suppressed a shudder at that particular memory. Not wanting Byers to pick up on discomfort, Steve forced himself further into the room that was draped in an eerie red glow, his shoulder brushing slightly against the shorter boy's in the small space. Clearing his throat, he jerked his head towards the pieces of papers dangling from a line.

"That them?"

No. They're nuclear launch codes. What the hell do you think they are, Harrington?!

Jonathan merely nodded, taking a step closer to them.

"They're almost done," he murmured over his shoulder.

Steve shuffled forward, stopping at Jonathan's side and watched as pictures started to appear on the previously blank pieces of paper.

"Whoa," he mumbled.

It was Hawkins. But not like he had ever seen it.

The woods, the Mom and Pop shop near his uncle's house, the quarry, the football field...each were captured in such a way that they shone, appearing to lift off the page almost as if they were some sort of hologram like in Star Wars. They were...beautiful. He knew that they were actually mundane, were places he had seen a dozen times over and yet, the way Byers had captured them they felt...something else. Something unknown. Something he was witnessing for the first time, at this very moment. Steve knew he was gaping, entranced, eyes travelling from one photo to the next, feeling as if he was stepping into each one like in that dumb movie about the British nanny...

His gaze screeched to a halt on the last picture, eyebrows shooting up his forehead.

It was of a boy, standing at his locker, head bent as he packed his bag full of books. It had been taken at a distance, his mop of dark hair a

mere smudge in the top centre of the page, the figure hardly more than a silhouette really, but it was enough.

"I thought you were done with stalking, Byers."

Their new-found acquaintance was tenuous at best, a fragile, shakeable thread weaved between them by their mutual admiration of Nancy Wheeler. Over the last month and a half, ever since everything went to hell and came crawling back, they had found themselves in the same place more often than not. But they nearly always had Nancy as a buffer.

Steve wasn't stupid. He saw the way Byers looked at her. How he drank her in each and every moment they were all together. He tapered down his spike of irritation, the nudging jealousy that simmered beneath the surface of his skin, though. Because Byers...he was all right. He may have had a gigantic crush on his girlfriend, but he was all right. And his friendship was important to Nancy, so that made it important to Steve.

But the two guys, they were acquaintances, not friends.

Steve and Jonathan both knew that.

And it was never more apparent than right now, in this moment, as Jonathan startled, no doubt realising what he had let slip in allowing the taller boy to see that picture, scrambling forward and yanking it off the line in an effort to shield it from view. But Steve Harrington had quick reflexes, something he thanked god for as he snatched it out of Byers' hands and held it up close to his face, eyes squinting as he fought to see himself clearly in the dark room.

"Huh."

Time stood still as Jonathan waited for him to continue, all that could be heard being his ragged breath bouncing between them.

"Guess Nancy was right."

A gust of breath rose the hairs on the side of Steve's neck.

Slowly, he lowered the picture from his face and was met with the

dark orbs of Jonathan Byers boring a hole into the centre of his forehead.

"Geez Byers, take a picture, it'll last longer."

Suddenly Steve snorted, realising what he had just said, waving the photo in the air and guffawing, "never mind, you already did."

Jonathan didn't laugh, didn't even crack a smile as he turned back to the rest of his pictures and snatched them down off the line, hastily shoving them into his bag.

Steve watched him, brow furrowed as he quickly gathered his stuff and made for the door.

"Wait, Byers—"

"I gotta go," the shorter boy cut across him.

"Where? Class doesn't start for another hour."

Jonathan ignored him, pushing past him and reaching out for the door handle.

Steve shot in front of him, palm pushing against his chest, pressing the picture into his shirt as he stared him down.

"Why did you take a picture of me?"

That was not what he intended to say. He intended to chew Byers out for being creepy and weird but those words just wouldn't come, couldn't come, not anymore.

He couldn't say he missed that part of himself.

"I'm sorry."

Byers looked like those weren't the words he intended to say either.

"No I—" Steve scrambled for the right words, his eyes flickering from Jonathan's gaze, down to the picture and back up, "I don't care about that. Shit, take pictures of whatever, I don't care. Just...why me?"

Jonathan's eyebrows rose, his Adam's apple bobbing in his throat.

"You...you take pictures of nature and Nancy and I get why," Steve continued, marvelling at what the hell his mouth seemed to be saying all on its own with no input from him whatsoever, "but I'm just standing in front of my locker. Why take a picture of that? I...don't get it."

Steve Harrington was not a guy that willingly admitted to others about not getting things. Unless that other person was Nancy. He wasn't sure what compelled him into such an admission to Jonathan Byers of all people but it was too late to take it back now.

He felt rather than saw Byers shrug.

"You were there."

A frown befell his face as those words sunk in.

He snorted, "wow. Way to make a guy feel special, Byers. The water fountain was 'just there.' You take a picture of that too?"

Steve may have imagined it, but it almost looked like a smile was playing about Byers' lips.

"I did, actually. From multiple angles."

"God, I love it when you talk dirty."

That was it. His mouth was no longer allowed free reign. He was hereby placing a gag order on himself.

Jonathan's eyes widened a little, looking just as surprised as Steve felt.

Seconds ticked by in which the latter became incredibly aware that he still had his palm pressed against the former's chest, able to feel each and every breath he took, the quick beat of his heart pulsing underneath cotton and skin. Biting his lip, Steve silently berated himself, clearing his throat for what felt the millionth time in the last twenty minutes and taking a step back, picture still held firmly in his grasp.

"Like I said, Nance was right. You're a good photographer, Byers."

Jonathan didn't seem to have a response to that so Steve took that as his cue, turning on his heel and opening the door, holding up the picture and calling over his shoulder, "I'm keeping this, by the way. My good hair days deserve to be documented."

Byers snorted, locking up and following him for a few steps before turning right as Steve made his way left.

"You're the kinda asshole that has scrapbooks full of pictures of himself, aren't you?"

Steve turned, walking backwards as he tilted his head at him, "Mom's gotta have something to cry over when I'm gone off to college."

The photographer shook his head, carob eyes rolling to the ceiling, "whatever, Joel Goodson."

"So you admit it," Steve pointed an accusatory finger in the air, "I do look like Tom Cruise."

The two students regarded one another as they stood twenty feet apart.

"Trust me Harrington," Byers replied in that irritatingly low tone, an indecipherable expression on his face, "you don't wanna know what I think."

With that, he turned on his heel.

He barely made it ten steps when Steve's unrelenting mouth began running again:

"Me and Nance are going to an early showing of Footloose tomorrow night. She wanted me to ask you if you wanna come."

Nancy had done no such thing.

Jonathan didn't need to know that.

Not that he didn't love spending time with Nancy, because he did, but

even he had to admit that being forced into seeing some chick flick when he already had practically no male interaction since his and Tommy's friendship blew up was just a step too far from the level of masculinity Steve Harrington had become accustomed to. At least with Byers tagging along he got to keep his girlfriend happy and maybe find something more of the male persuasion to talk about.

Right. That made sense. That had to be why he suddenly asked Byers to join him and his girlfriend on what was supposed to be their date night.

Who knew, it could even be...fun?

What was that people always say?

"You asked him to the movies with us?"

Steve grimaced, never more glad that his girlfriend couldn't see his face over the phone.

"I—weren't you just saying last week that you wanted to spend more time with Byers after Christmas?"

"Well, yeah..." Nancy's voice trickled down the phone as Steve stood in front of his bedroom mirror and fixed his shirt, "I just, I guess I'm surprised, that's all."

Yeah, that made two of them.

"Well, I know his friendship is important to you, babe. And he—he doesn't have a lot of friends and after everything with—" he stopped himself in his tracks before Barb's name could fall from his lips, "after *everything* I just thought that..." he trailed off, running a hand down his face as he realised not for the first time since yesterday morning that he had no idea what he had been thinking.

Nancy seemed to have some sort of an idea thankfully as she piped up, "it's sweet, Steve, really. Thank you. You're right, Jonathan's friendship does mean a lot to me and I'm...I'm sure that you guys could...if you just gave each other a shot you could...I don't know. You both actually have a lot in common."

Steve sincerely doubted that.

"Yeah, Byers is...he's all right," he forced himself to reply, after all, you couldn't really hold a grudge with the guy that set the giant faceless monster that still haunts your dreams on fire, "and you were right about the pictures. They're good."

He could practically hear her smile.

"I'll see you at seven."

"Kick up your sundance shoes," Nancy sang, bopping her head as they filed out of the movie theatre several hours later.

"I think it was 'kick off the Sunday shoes'," Jonathan deadpanned as he followed along behind them.

Steve snickered.

A hand smacked his shoulder, "shut up, Harrington."

"Sorry, sorry," he broke away from her, holding up his hands in surrender, catching Jonathan's eye before finishing, "my bad, Sundance."

Byers chuckled softly before tilting his head at her, his gaze passing between the couple, a thoughtful look on his face, "you meeting Butch here later, or...?"

A laugh bubbled up Steve's throat, surprising him.

Nancy glared at him, then Jonathan and back again before muttering, "you know, I think I liked it better when you two were punching each other."

Silence met her words.

Slowly, her eyebrow raised, a mischievous glint in her gaze as she asked in a faux-innocent tone, "what? Too soon?"

The two boys gaped at her before exchanging a glance and silently

walking faster, towards the diner they had all decided on going to after the movie.

"Wait, guys! Oh come on, I was just kidding! Wait up!"

Steve and Jonathan caught each other's eye again, barely suppressing smug grins as Nancy ran to catch up with them.

Surprisingly, Steve turned out to be right.

Tonight was...fun.

"Jonathan, these are amazing!"

The trio sat in a booth at Dina's Diner, eating fries and sipping milkshakes, Nancy pouring over Jonathan's latest batch of pictures, an awe-struck expression crossing her beautiful face. Steve found himself alternating between staring at her, the pictures and the blush that had been steadily rising up Byers' neck for the last twenty minutes.

Shaking his head, he forced his eyes to lower, turning the closest picture over and scanning the back.

"1984," he murmured as he caught the handwritten date that Byers had scrawled in the corner, "guess Orwell was wrong, huh?"

He could feel two sets of heavy stares angled his way.

"Was he?"

Steve looked up and met Jonathan's knowing glance.

The three of them couldn't help but briefly reflect on everything that went down barely two months before.

"Guess not."

With a quick glimpse at her watch, Nancy broke the tension with a quiet, "it's getting late. I really should be going..."

And so, the trio gathered up their stuff, leaving a tip for the waitress

and throwing on their coats as they stepped out into the night air. With an awkward jerk of his head, Jonathan started to walk back the way they came, calling out a quiet, "see you guys first period."

"Jonathan!" Nancy took several steps toward him, throwing a look at her boyfriend over her shoulder before turning back to him, "it's too far to walk. Let Steve give you a ride home."

It was not a request and they all knew it.

Which was how Steve Harrington found himself driving to Casa Byers at 11:33pm on a Thursday night.

A somewhat uncomfortable silence had engulfed the two once Nancy had vacated the car with a quick hug for Jonathan and a kiss to the cheek with a whispered "behave" for Steve, that knowing glint ever-present in her cerulean irises as she waved them off. Byers had climbed into the front seat after receiving his hug and had not stopped tapping his hands on his knees along to the radio that was playing his mix-tape for the last four minutes. Steve was this close to telling him to knock it off when the opening bars of a familiar song reached his ears.

Is this the real life? Is this just fantasy? Caught in a landslide, no escape from reality...

He found himself quietly singing along, never able to resist the dulcet tones of Freddie Mercury.

"You know Queen?"

He couldn't help but hear the sheer disbelief in the other man's tone.

Throwing him a brief withering glare before focusing back on the road, Steve nodded, "yeah. I mean, I know they're not a huge deal here, they're much bigger in Britain, a goddamn travesty if you ask me, but man, my dad went on a business trip there a few years back and brought home *A Night at the Opera* and I've kinda been obsessed with them ever since."

He could feel the weight of Jonathan's stare on the side of his face and determinedly kept his eyes on the road.

It seemed this night contained tonnes of surprises. For both of them. Before either could continue, Steve pulled up at the Byers residence, the outside light a soft glow in the night's gloom. They sat there, quietly listening as Freddie, Roger, Brian and John continued their impressive harmonies.

"Thanks for letting me crash your date," Jonathan said suddenly, chancing a glance at Steve out of the corner of his eye.

"You weren't—"

"Nancy said it was your idea to invite me."

Well, shit.

I'm just a poor boy, nobody loves me...

Heat flooded Steve's cheeks as he fought to think of a witty response. The other boy beat him to the punch however, "you can keep the tape. I think you need it more than I do," he finished with a little scathing nod to his mom's cassettes piled up on the dashboard.

Fuck Olivia Newton-John.

"Whatever, Byers. You're the weirdo that brings his own mix-tapes to group activities."

"Isn't that just being polite? Bringing your date a gift?"

Steve's eyebrows rose. He chanced a glance to his right and took a little smug pleasure in the fact that, intended sarcasm or not, Jonathan looked like he just admitted he still sucked his thumb.

"I'll be sure to tell Nancy to expect a gift next time."

Next time?

Byers, seemingly having lost the ability to speak, merely nodded, his flush from earlier making a comeback as it rose up his neck. Hastily, he threw open the car door, stepped out and slammed it behind him before he half walked/half ran towards his house with a shaky two-fingered salute thrown over his shoulder.

Steve stared at the space he once occupied for a full ten seconds before he shook his head.

Oh baby, can't do this to be baby. Just gotta get out, just gotta get right outta here...

"Steve," Nancy gasped, her breath hitching in his ear as he nibbled along her neck, his tongue leaving a hot, wet path in its wake.

"Y-You..." she rambled shakily, her hands pressing against his shoulders, "come on, Jonathan—" she was cut off when a low groan escaped her as he bit down on her collar bone.

"Huh, last time I checked, my name was Steve, not Jonathan," he teased, his lips brushing against her throat, "but nice to know where your head's at, Nance."

He could practically feel her eyes roll as she got herself under control and finished her sentence: "Jonathan will be here any minute. We should probably—"

He pressed a biting kiss to her lips, his chest flush against hers as they lay back on his bed.

Ever since that night at the movies, Jonathan had been included in more and more of their social activities. They sat together at lunch, met up after school and some weekends and as was the case with today, even did group projects. Hawkins High School's populous were more than a little confused. The trio were damn near inseparable all of a sudden and nobody knew just what to make of it. Tommy H and Carol tried voicing their opinions once or twice, yelling insults and snarky comments as they walked down the hallway, but with three stony glares directed their way, soon quietened down. So the rest of the student body did too, moving swiftly on to whatever new 'scandal' caught their eye. It wasn't like any of them were particularly of interest (especially once Steve stormed out of Tommy's orbit), anyway. The weirdo, the nerd and the has-been.

Steve had to admit, the last month and a half had been fun. Turned out he and Byers did have a lot in common as Nancy had promised.

Both had snarky senses of humour that bordered on lame (in Nancy's opinion) and both had an avid interest in music. And, Steve had to concede, it was nice to have a guy around again, even better when this one wasn't as much of a asshole as Tommy H had been. Not that he would ever admit that out loud.

With a frown, he realised that he was spending far too much time dwelling on Jonathan Byers when he currently had his very beautiful and smart girlfriend beneath him, something which did not go unnoticed as Nancy's hand reached up and cupped his cheek, her cerulean eyes wide in question, her pupils dilated.

"Hey, where'd you go?"

He shook his head gently, offering her a small smile before recapturing her lips, his hands sliding up from her hips to brush against the side of her breasts. Nancy arched her back at his ministrations, a guttural groan rising from her as her breath became shallow, her eyes falling closed as her arms wound around him and grabbed fistfuls of his t-shirt, pulling it up and off his body. Steve bit his lip as she dragged her nails down his back, the scratching sting summoning goose bumps across his skin. A shudder wracked his body as his pants tightened—

"Shit, sorry."

There was only one other time where he moved that damn fast. Those three syllables barely left Jonathan Byers' mouth before Steve had bolted up off his bed, turned on the spot and backed himself up against the wall, chest heaving as he fought to control his ragged breathing.

"Jesus, Byers! What did I say about wearing a bell?!"

The photographer stood in the middle of his room, dark orbs flickering from Nancy who was busy fixing her blouse and smoothing down her hair, to Steve who was painfully aware he was very shirtless and very hard.

"I-I'll just..." Jonathan trailed off, cheeks a deep crimson, eyes glued to the floor as he jerked a thumb over his shoulder and turned on his

heel, practically sprinting out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

A full five seconds passed before Nancy heaved a sigh.

"Dammit, Steve."

They still got an A on their project.

That was mostly down to Nancy and Jonathan, though. After their little...interruption, the latter had been more distant than usual (which was saying something) and things were, awkward, to say the least.

Something sharp and uncomfortable had settled in Steve's gut as he tried to ignore the tension in the room, instead playing perfect host and plying his guests with refreshments and trying to pull his weight in the research-department. It was here he fell short. Every time he looked up from his book, he found himself transfixed with his two companions and how well they worked together. In everything they did, they worked in perfect harmony, practically finishing each other's sentences.

"Jonathan, that's perfect!" Nancy exclaimed, her eyes alight with an excitement that Steve couldn't ever remember seeing before as she smacked him playfully on the shoulder.

Byers smiled gently, head bowed, clearly pleased with her praise.

Something stirred in Steve's chest at the very sight so he focussed his attention back on Nancy only to see the same pleased grin on her face as she pulled books closer to her, a fiery determination in her movements, complemented and fuelled by Byers' soft input.

What was weird though was that what spiked in Steve's veins didn't feel like jealousy. Once upon a time he had felt that, back when he looked through Nancy's bedroom window and saw Jonathan sitting with her on her bed, jealousy mixed with a fuck-ton of pain had flared in his chest but...not now. He wasn't sure what he felt now and that frustrated the hell out of him.

He was still trying to decipher what the hell was going on with him several hours after both his study buddies had gone home, leaving him to his thoughts in his large, empty house. His parents were on another business trip aboard and in lieu of a party, Nancy had suggested they all get a head-start on their project. Steve couldn't help but agree, looking forward to spending time with his girlfriend and Byers alone.

How times had changed.

How he changed.

Bored with TV, he decided to go to bed early, the strange sensation, something akin to an itch he couldn't quite scratch still simmering underneath his skin. With a sigh, he threw himself onto his bed and stared up at the ceiling. He could smell the faint scent of whatever flowery perfume Nancy had worn that day lingering on his pillow and smiled gently, casting his mind back to their fooling around session earlier.

Images flooded his brain as Steve let his eyes fall shut.

It was if he was having an outer body experience. In one way, he could practically feel the ghost of Nancy's nails clawing up his back, but in another, he imagined he was standing at the foot of his bed, staring at another version of himself draped over her. He bit his lip, his hand drifting to the waistband of his sweatpants as he remembered how it felt sucking on her neck, hearing the little hitch in her breath. He palmed himself through his boxers as he focused on how her petite hands looked spread across the other him, how good the two of them looked together as they moved as one, how she gripped his shoulders tight and pushed her heaving chest up into his.

He watched, spellbound as her slender fingers traced his shoulder blades, sliding up to his neck and burying themselves in his long, brown tresses—

Wait, what?

Steve frowned as he watched Nancy continue to touch some other very willing guy that had somehow replaced him. He scrambled

around the side of the bed, staring at the expanse of exposed skin and lean muscles, shoulders, pecs and abs of a gasping, horny teenager that was definitely not him.

"Jonathan..."

He gaped as Nancy's groan reached his ears, gaze glued to the two half-naked bodies as they explored each other.

There was that feeling again, lurking in the depths of his chest, fluttering up from his stomach.

Not jealousy, but something...else.

Absentmindedly, through the fog shrouding his brain, somewhere on outside where he lay alone on his bed, he was partially aware that he was still firmly cupping himself but didn't have it in him to take his hand away. He stood stock-still in his mind, mesmerized, hearing those familiar breathy moans, the tiny gasps and the stuttered words as Jonathan reached around and unclasped Nancy's bra, baring her pert, creamy breasts and peppering them with kisses.

Steve held his breath as she arched off the bed, moaning loudly as a tongue swirled her nipple, lapping and sucking it into an eager mouth. His throat went dry at the sight, his cock twitching beneath his palm. Slowly, almost as if it was on autopilot, his fingers trailed back up to the waistband of his boxers and slipped inside, all the way down so he could grip himself, skin on skin.

Slowly, he dragged his dry palm over the head, barely suppressing a shudder as he squeezed his eyes ever tighter, trying to hold on to the image in his head. Nancy looked...enchanted, the moonlight reflecting off her ivory skin much like it had their first night together. And Jonathan...no matter how hard he tried, Steve could not unglue his eyes from him, this fantasy version of him with his shining carob orbs and floppy hair that had fallen into those eyes as his large hands brushed over every inch of Nancy's flushed chest.

Fantasy-Steve's fingers twitched as he was suddenly overcome by the ridiculous urge to brush those tresses off the other boy's forehead, to rake his hands through to feel if it was as soft as it looked. Real-

Steve's hands were much busier, one clutching desperately at his bedsheet as the other pumped his cock faster and faster, his heart hammering in his ears as Fantasy-Nancy looked between the two boys, a gleam in her eyes as she reached forward, grabbing a fistful of Fantasy-Steve's shirt and tugging him down onto the bed.

Steve shuddered at the picture the three of them made, his thigh pressed up against Jonathan's as they both sat in front of Nancy, crammed close together on Steve's bed, each wrapped up in each other's breath, scent, heat...

He gasped as lips brushed against his neck. Lips that were definitely not Nancy's.

His eyes burst open, alarmed at his mind's wanderings, his hand stilling its ministrations.

What the fuck was that?

Chest heaving, he stared wide-eyed up at his dark ceiling, fighting to control his rapid breathing and desperately trying to ignore his aching hard cock as it pulsed beneath his hand.

He did not just fantasise about Jonathan Byers kissing his neck.

Sure, he got turned on at the sight of Nancy (who wouldn't?), and yeah, it was weird when Fantasy-Steve suddenly morphed into Jonathan, but that—that didn't mean...

What the hell did that mean?

Frowning, he shook his head to clear it of the vestiges of whatever lapse of sanity he was clearly having and tried to get back into the mood, letting his eyes fall closed once more and imaging Nancy and him (only him!) back on his bed.

He smirked as the vision easily came to him, the familiarity of it comforting. He had knocked one out to this so many times he had lost count and having the real thing, actual memories to back up the fantasy, well that...that just made it sweeter when it was just him and his hand. Whatever...weirdness from before had well and truly gone and he soon got the release he had been chasing before hastily

cleaning up, rolling over onto his side and letting sleep claim him.

It was when he woke up several hours later sweating, gasping for breath, painfully hard with the memory of him and Jonathan taking turns making out with Nancy before turning to each other and going to town that he really started to freak the fuck out.

"Why don't you ask Jonathan?"

Steve blinked, convinced he heard his girlfriend wrong.

"You want me to ask Jonathan Byers to go gift-shopping for my cousin with me?"

Jesus, it sounded even more ridiculous out loud.

Nancy let out a long-suffering sigh, "you guys need to hang out more—without me," she jumped in before he could counter that they hung out plenty, "come on, you said it yourself that I was right and you guys have stuff in common. He made you laugh the other day, I heard it with my own ears."

She was starting to let that smug tone seep into her voice that he hated but he also kinda loved.

"And besides," oh yeah, she was going in for the kill, "Jonathan has a little brother. You don't. He is definitely more qualified to pick out a gift for a Bar Mitzvah."

"You have a little brother," he reminded her dryly and could practically feel her rolling her eyes.

"Yeah, but I was never a twelve year old boy. Jonathan was, you were. So go pick out something for Jason. And try not kill each other."

And that was that.

Steve knocked on the Byers' door and forced himself not to shuffle back and forth. Biting his lip, he ran a hand through his hair just as the door opened, revealing Will, staring up wide-eyed at him.

"Uh...hey, Will. Is Jonathan there?"

God, he felt like a kid.

"Hi Steve," he nodded before turning around and calling over his shoulder, "Jonathan! Steve is here!"

"Do you wanna come in?" the younger boy asked, gesturing behind him.

Whiskey eyes lingered around the living room and barely managed to suppress a shudder at the memories that assaulted him.

"Uh—"

"Steve, hey...what's up?"

Dragging his gaze away from the wall that once had the alphabet scrawled across it in giant black letters, Steve felt relief as Jonathan came into view, looking slightly puzzled, walking towards him and halting just behind his brother, hand resting on the door.

Words failed him as he stared back and forth between the Byers siblings. Why had Nancy thought this was a good idea again?

"Uh..." he cleared his throat, rubbing the back of his neck, "I was just wondering if you were uh...my cousin is, well, he's...it's his Bar Mitzvah and I gotta get him a gift and Nancy mentioned that you're good at that kinda stuff so uh..."

He may have imagined it, but he was fairly certain in that moment that a smile was forming around Jonathan's lips, reaching all the way up to his eyes, they alight with amusement with his obvious awkwardness.

"You want help picking out a gift for your cousin?" he asked, apparently taking pity on the taller boy.

Steve nodded vigorously, wanting nothing more than just to turn on his heel and high-tail it out of there but he stood his ground, aware that Byers' kid brother was watching his every move too.

Jonathan shrugged, "all right. We gotta drop Will off at Lucas's first, though."

Five minutes later they were all piled into Steve's car and on their way to the Sinclair's house. Will sat in the back, content to just stare quietly out the window as his brother sat up front, tapping restlessly on his knees.

I've seen you in the mirror when the story began , and I fell in love with you, I love your mortal sin. Your brains are locked away but I love your company—

Steve didn't miss the frown of confusion cross the young boy's face when he looked in the rear view mirror.

"Is this your tape, Jonathan?"

The two teens froze as they stopped at a red light, Johnny Rotten's vocals bleeding through the speakers.

"Uh, yeah, it is."

Steve found his whitening knuckles very interesting as he wrapped his hands tighter around the steering wheel, heart jack-hammering in his chest.

"Huh."

It seemed that was all Will had to say on the matter.

The Byers boys exited the car three minutes later just as the next song was about to start.

You spurn my natural emotions , you make me feel I'm dirt and I'm hurt. And if I start a commotion, I run the risk of losing you and that's worse...

Steve took that moment to unclench his hands and take in a breath, not realising that he had been practically holding it since he started driving. He could see Jonathan and Will approaching the Sinclair's front door and mere seconds later, another kid answering it, holding it open for his friend to pass.

The older Byers exchanged a few words with him before shoving his hands in his pockets and turning on his heel, shuffling back up the driveway. Steve quickly averted his eyes but not before he could miss the bewildered look Lucas shot his way before closing the door. He forced his gaze forward as Jonathan climbed into the car and pulled on his seat belt.

Ever fallen in love with someone, ever fallen in love, in love with someone, ever fallen in love, in love with someone you shouldn't have fallen in love with?

Steve swallowed deeply, clearing his throat, trying to cure it of its sudden weird dryness, watching out of the corner of his eye as Byers froze, one hand still on his seat belt.

"Uh...I was just gonna head to the mall outside of Hawkins?"

Jonathan jumped at his voice, dark eyes snapping to his before just as quickly averting back to the windshield, palms clenching his knees tightly.

"Yeah, okay."

From then on, his hands remained glued to his knees, fingers frozen, not tapping in the slightest, not even when Bohemian Rhapsody came on.

Steve felt a weird ache in his chest at the absence.

The words will always be "kick up your sundance shoes." Fuck Google. Me and Nance are stickin' to our guns. After all, she is one hell of a shot. And you know, luckily for her, Google's not a thing yet.

NEXT CHAPTER TEASER:

They weren't the worst dreams in the world if he was being honest. Actually, in comparison to all the freaky shit he had been dreaming about for the last few months, the smell of burning monster flesh still lingering in his nose as he clutched his bedsheets, his eyes darting around his empty room, it was

downright pleasant.

But he wasn't...*like that*.

He liked girls. One in particular, very much.

It was probably just some belated PTSD bullshit, invading his mind in the dead of night, the trauma of what he went through mixing with his teenage libido and creating some sort of strange sexual by-product from all the adrenaline and shit.

Yeah, that was it.

That had to explain why for the fifth night in a row, he woke up panting and hard, the ghost of Jonathan Byer's lips on the back of his neck as Nancy wrapped her legs around him at the forefront of his racing mind.

2. Chapter Two: The Affirmation

Have Happened

By Cortexikid

Chapter Two: The Affirmation

Warning: homophobic slurs ahead because Tommy H is a giant douchenozzle.

"So what *do* you get a kid for his Bar Mitzvah?"

Steve openly gaped at Jonathan as they pulled up outside the mall.

"Uh...I was kinda hoping you'd tell *me* that, Byers. It's sorta the whole reason you're here," he huffed, turning off the ignition and swivelling in his seat so the other boy could truly feel the power of his exasperation.

"And here I thought it was because you enjoyed the pleasure of my company," Jonathan deadpanned with a tilt of his head.

"Oh yeah, you're a fucking delight," Steve faux-agreed, not sounding half as sarcastic as he would have liked, "but you're also the guy with a kid brother, something which I don't have."

Jonathan stared at him for a beat before shrugging and climbing out of the car. Taking that as the best sign he would possibly get, Steve followed suit, shuffling across the parking lot, hands shoved in his jacket pockets.

"Aren't you cold?" he asked, not failing to notice how the shorter boy wore nothing but a faded Sex Pistols t-shirt and some jeans that had dirt caked on the knees.

Byers shrugged again.

"Jonathan Byers – Master Conversationalist," Steve remarked drily just as they reached the mall doors.

"That's me," the photographer smirked, pulling open the glass door and letting it slam back into Steve who barely caught it in time before it smacked into his face.

"And they say chivalry is dead," he grumbled under his breath, jogging to catch up.

Turned out that the mall had a lot of shit that nobody really needed. Like, at all. Ever. Why the hell was a machine named after a piece of fruit, anyway? Pfft. Apple Computers. What a dumb idea. What exactly was a Macintosh? Looked like something from Star Trek. Steve gave them six months before bankruptcy. Tops.

"I don't know, man. They've been around since '76," Jonathan remarked when he heard this particular opinion as they stared at an ad for a new product just outside the bookstore they had been in, "I think they're gonna be kinda a big deal."

At \$3,195 a piece? Steve highly doubted it. He wisely kept his mouth shut, though. No point in getting into an argument over some nerdy shit, anyway. Byers out-nerded him by a long shot. He'd be fighting a losing battle. To save face, he kept walking, heading straight to Rick's Records, something much more his speed.

"Ever notice how the people of Hawkins love alliteration?"

He could feel the surprise rolling off Jonathan in waves. Slowly he turned, quirked an unimpressed eyebrow at him.

"Yes, Byers. I said the word 'alliteration.' Shocking, I know. Try to contain yourself."

Jonathan almost looked sheepish before he nodded, "yeah, I've noticed. Benny's Burgers, Dina's Diner, Rick's Records..." he trailed off before adding as an after-thought, "must be a small-town thing."

Steve snorted, a sarcastic remark on the tip of his tongue before he caught sight of a familiar figure walking out of the store and towards them.

"Oh shit."

"Well, well, well. If it isn't Byers and his boyfriend."

Jonathan halted just in time before Tommy H crashed into them, an ugly scowl marring his face. Steve's jaw clenched as he stopped at Byers's side and stared down his former friend who finally turned to him, his dark gaze cold.

"You fags out shopping for lube, or...?"

A trickle of laughter erupted from a couple of Tommy's cronies that Steve vaguely recognised.

"So Byers," the asshole directed at Jonathan, clapping him on the shoulder and leaning into him, his face uncomfortably close.

Jonathan barely hid a grimace. Knowing how shitty Tommy's breath smelled, Steve had to admit he was impressed Byers wasn't gagging.

"Last night, did Stevie boy clean your pipes or did you clean his? I bet you cleaned his," his ex-friend snorted before glaring Steve right in the eye, "he seems more of a taker than a giver."

Steve's jaw clenched as Tommy let go of Jonathan and walked around them, pretending to write on his hand, "what's on the shopping list next, boys? Lube, check. Condoms - ribbed for his pleasure, check. Hmm..." he trailed off, snapping his fingers, "butt plugs! That's gotta be it, right?"

Another wave of laughter washed over them.

"You sure do know a lot about gay sex for a straight dude, Tommy."

Steve gaped at Jonathan before a surprised chuckle burst from him, high-lighted by the fact that one of the guys from Tommy's group also unsuccessfully smothered a snort.

The atmosphere instantly changed as Steve's former-friend's gaze turned murderous, shoving Jonathan before pulling him back in by his t-shirt and spitting into his face:

"The fuck you say, Byers?!"

Steve dashed forward but Jonathan held out a hand, stopping him in his tracks.

"You heard me, Harris. Just...it seems kinda weird you know so much about what goes down when two guys fuck. You speaking from experience or...?"

Steve pulled him back just in time, Tommy's fist swiping the air where Jonathan's face had just been.

"Time to go, Byers," he murmured into his ear before spinning on the spot and pulling the shorter boy with him, away from the horde of idiots.

"Oh yeah, run you fucking queer!" Tommy yelled after him, tone thunderous, "it's what you're best at! Enjoy slummin' it with Byers' psycho mom and freak brother. The kid shoulda stayed dead, if you ask me. Better than livin' in that shit-hole with fag Charles Manson for a brother!"

Steve stopped in his tracks as he felt Jonathan tense, his entire body rigid. He met his gaze, wincing as he saw a fresh wave of pain flashing into the shorter boy's dark irises before it was quickly hidden behind a wall of carefully-placed indifference.

His blood ran cold.

Before he knew what was happening, Steve whipped around and stormed back, ignoring Jonathan's call and socking Tommy right in the jaw with as much force as he could muster. The asshole stumbled back in surprise, cupping his face, a loud grunt ripping from his throat but Steve didn't have time to revel in it as suddenly two rough hands were pulling him back towards the mall entrance, shoving him out the doors and dragging him to the car.

Yeah...that was probably a good idea.

"Holy shit," he gaped, hardly believing what he had just done as he threw his keys at Jonathan who caught them mid-air and launched himself into the car.

"Holy shit, holy shit," Steve continued, barely registering the loud

shouts that were getting closer and closer to them as he paced back and forth near the passenger-side door, a goofy smile spreading across his face, "did you see that?! Byers did you see—"

"Get in the fucking car, Harrington!"

"Shit!" Steve hissed, jerking back and glaring at Jonathan who sighed at him, lowering the ice-pack.

They had high-tailed it back to Casa Byers after finally losing Tommy and his gang of fuckwads. It was around that time that Steve finally realised that his hand had swelled up like a goddamn balloon and was killing him.

"Will you hold still?" Jonathan asked, exasperation seeping in his tone at Steve's antics, "Jesus, it's not that bad."

"Fuck you, Byers. I think my hand is broken!"

Jonathan rolled his eyes.

"It's not broken, it's sprained at most."

"You a doctor now?"

Jonathan avoided eye contact, muttering quietly to his knees, "no, but I have had my hand broken. Trust me, if it was, you'd know it."

Steve's jaw snapped shut, his ready-made retort dying on his lips.

A few beats of awkward silence passed before he eventually held out his hand for the ice-pack, which was really just some ice-cubes wrapped in a ratty towel. Gently, Byers placed it on the back of his knuckles, pressing it into him.

Steve stared as Jonathan's fingers lightly brushed his skin.

"Hold it there," the photographer murmured out of the side of his mouth, still not looking him in the eye.

Steve wordlessly did as he was told, heart leaping into his throat as

Jonathan removed his hand.

What the fuck is wrong with you, Harrington? Get a grip!

It was then that he finally realised that he was actually sitting in the Byers' living room. His eyes bounced around erratically.

"Shit I—I haven't been here since..."

Oh yeah, great conversation starter. Bring up the giant monster that kidnapped his brother and nearly ate us that time. A fucking plus, Stevie Boy.

Out of his peripheral vision he could see Jonathan glance around them for a moment, an indecipherable expression on his face as he rubbed the back of his neck, "yeah uh...sorry. My house was nearer and—and I know those assholes don't have the balls to come here. I—I'll get your keys and drive—"

"No Byers, it's...it's okay," Steve cut across him, an apology laced in his tone, "it's...I'm...I'm fine," he finished lamely.

Jonathan nodded before standing up and checking his watch. His eyebrows rose before he started to make his way to the phone that hung on the wall. Steve, who had been watching him, frowned in confusion.

"What are you doing?"

Jonathan picked up the phone and held it between his ear and shoulder, "I'm calling Nancy. She told me to check in every few hours so she'd know we haven't killed each other."

"What? When did she do that?"

"She called about ten minutes before you got here."

Something tingled in his veins.

"So you knew I was coming over?"

Jonathan's mouth twitched minutely, his expression almost sheepish,

throwing him a one-shoulder shrug as he dialled in the Wheeler's number. Steve could hear the tone from where he sat and again was overwhelmed with the urge to fidget. Instead, he nursed his aching hand and looked around the living room, noting that with the absence of night and terrifying monsters, it almost felt homely. Lived in. That was something he could appreciate. His own mother was incredibly house-proud (emphasis on 'house' not 'home') and viewed most things as clutter to be either disposed of or put out of sight of any prying eyes. The Byers' home was different. Where the Harrington's was large, spacious and immaculate to the point of clinical, the Byers' was small, a little rough around the edges but full to the brim with trinkets and over-flowing with life.

When it was monster-less...it was nice.

"No answer," Jonathan's voice came from his right, snapping him from his reverie. Steve could sense those dark eyes as they settled on him, watching him look around the room. He could only imagine how Byers must have felt, having Steve here again, despite the drastically different circumstances.

"You uh...want something to drink?" he gestured awkwardly over his shoulder back towards the kitchen.

Steve nodded.

Jonathan began to move about the kitchen, rapidly opening and closing cabinets.

"We got uh...water and...water."

A flicker of something indistinguishable passed over Byers' face as he slammed the fridge door shut. Steve frowned, feeling the tension roll off of him in waves.

"Water would be great," he answered simply, noting the hunch in the other boy's shoulders.

Jonathan nodded, crossing to the sink and quickly filling two glasses. Steve stared at his back, watching as the tense muscles grew tighter and tighter with each passing second. Before he knew it, he stood up

and stopped at his side, tilting his head at him.

"Hey man, what's going on with you?"

Byers' jaw clenched, his gaze trained on the faucet as he muttered, "why did you have to punch him?"

Steve gaped, feeling as if he had just been dowsed with baltic water.

"What do you mean?" he began, confusion leaking into his tone, "you think I shoulda just stood there and—"

"Let him hit me?" Jonathan spat, whirling around to glare at him, carob eyes flashing, his lividness suddenly unleashed, "yeah, I do."

A scoff escaped Steve as he threw up his hands in the air, "okay, and what would that have accomplished, exactly? You get your face rearranged and Tommy—"

"Leaves you and Nancy alone."

Well, shit.

A blush that Steve was getting more and more acquainted with had spread from Jonathan's neck right up to his face as he hastily ploughed on:

"You know he's yellin' at Nancy in the hallway?" he took a step towards Steve, fury crossing his features, "callin' her all sorts of shit?" Another step. "You know Carol tried to corner her in the girl's bathroom last week?" Another step complemented by a slow smirk, "Nancy nearly broke her arm."

Steve did know that. But Jonathan wasn't done. Another step, this time all traces of a smirk gone as a steel gaze met his "I know the shit he's been doing to you too. It's why you've been coming to school extra early the last few weeks."

Something that felt an awful lot like embarrassment and shame surged up from the pit of his stomach as he pushed out a breath, running a hand through his hair.

"Yeah well...Tommy's an ass. He can write on my locker all he wants. Doesn't mean I'm gonna stand by and let him punch your face in."

Jonathan snorted, tilting his head at him, "wasn't that long ago *you* were punching my face in."

"I got the raw end of that deal if I remember correctly, Rocky."

And there was that look again, the half-sheepish/half-smug expression that made him either want to punch Jonathan in the face again or—

No. Not that. Nope. What?

Steve mentally shook himself as Byers continued, "you still shoulda let me sock the guy," he paused, lips twitching, "least *I* wouldn't've broken my hand."

"I THOUGHT YOU SAID IT WASN'T BROKEN!?"

A laugh erupted from the photographer then, a full, hearty, belly-laugh that Steve had never heard from him ever before. Stunned, he could feel a smile spread across his own face even as he said, "fuck you, Byers."

"According to Tommy, you already have."

Silence fell between them, Steve's eyes bulging as Jonathan cleared his throat, moving quickly on, a deep crimson settling on the bridge of his nose, "anyway, you didn't have to—"

"Yeah Byers, I did," Steve interrupted him, holding up his hand and taking the last step toward him, only a few inches between them now, "because as usual, you and your smart mouth got you in trouble. And stepping in and making sure that your friend doesn't get his nose, jaw, or other important body part broken is kinda the—"

"We're friends?"

Carob orbs met whiskey.

Steve's eyebrows shot up his forehead as his words sunk in. He felt

the familiar burn of embarrassment in his gut as he struggled to save face, rubbing his neck and rambling:

"Well uh, I—just thought, uh, since you know...we've been...and everything that went down with...and Nancy...I—"

A slow, small smile, a quirking of the lips really, was all Steve needed to break off his train of thought and scoff: "fuck you, Byers."

"Only if you ask nicely, Harrington."

There was no awkward silence this time, only the shared grin of the birthing of a private joke.

A warmth settled in Steve's chest as Jonathan seemed to suddenly remember the water, handing him a glass before turning back to his own and taking a sip. He watched him out of his peripheral vision for a moment and tried to squash down the weird jack-hammering of his heart that had leapt into his throat at Byers' teasing words.

Desperate for a subject change, he glanced around the kitchen and noticed an empty box in the far corner.

"You've got an Atari? Awesome! Me too! You got Missile Command?"

Jonathan nodded, gesturing to the cabinet by the TV.

"Cool, you wanna play?"

Byers quirked an eyebrow at him, his eyes falling on Steve's busted hand.

"What about your broken wing?"

Steve scoffed, waving his other hand dismissively, "I'm a *Commander*, Byers. We laugh in the face of adversity."

Jonathan let out a low chuckle and much like the hearty laugh from before, it set alight his eyes as a warmth settled in Steve's chest, they sitting themselves back down in front of the TV.

It didn't feel nearly as weird sitting on the floor playing video games with Jonathan Byers as it probably should have. What was weird was how eerily good he was at video games, despite having barely played before. So, naturally, Steve had to throw him off. Psych him out. It was like, the law.

"Left, Byers! Left! YOUR OTHER LEFT!"

Jonathan remained unfazed however, kicking his ass and his high score, yet again.

Shit-eating grin firmly in place, he passed the controller back to Steve just as the Byers' front door opened and Joyce walked in, arms laden with grocery bags, calling out:

"Jonathan, I'm—"

She halted in her tracks, her eyes landing on them. Steve tensed, staring at Mrs Byers, forcing what was probably a tentative smile on his face as Jonathan stood up, immediately taking the grocery bags and helping her in.

"Hey mom, you remember Steve, right?"

Irises identical to Jonathan's drank in every inch of Steve for an uncomfortably long moment before she nodded, her face unreadable, "oh yes, I know Steve. Harrington, right?"

She directed this at him but still stared at her son, the same odd expression on her face.

Steve stood up off the floor, gut clenching as he forced out, "yeah ma'am, that's me."

Several hours passed. Or maybe just a couple of seconds, he couldn't really be sure at that point, until finally, Joyce tilted her head at him and held out her hand murmuring quietly but sincerely, "I heard you helped Nancy and Jonathan scare off that thing. You helped save their lives. Thank you."

He was struck dumb but managed to clasp her hand in his, shaking it softly as he nodded more times than was probably necessary, letting

out the breath of air that he had somehow been holding the entire time.

At that, Joyce let go of his hand, took the groceries back from Jonathan and stepped into the kitchen, calling over her shoulder, "you boys go back to your game. I'll call you when dinner's ready."

Which was precisely how Steve Harrington found himself eating meatloaf and runny mashed potatoes with the Byers at seven o'clock on a Friday night. Shoving down the trepidation that was rising steadily from his gut, he sat himself down at the table, flanked on either side by a Byers as he drank in the sight of...interesting-looking food of varying colours and textures.

"This looks great, Mrs Byers," he smiled, to which she gave a loud scoff and roll of her eyes.

"Oh you little liar, you're sweet," she waved a dismissive hand at him, before pouring him a glass of juice from a large jug.

"It tastes great, mom," Jonathan piped up, having had his first forkful and throwing her an appreciative glance over Steve's head.

"Dirty, rotten liars, both of you," she deadpanned, eyes dancing with amusement before gently nudging her house-guest, "and please, Steve, it's Joyce. Mrs Byers was Lonnie's mother and that old hag—"

"Mom—"

"Thanks for dinner...Joyce," Steve cut across Jonathan, his foot brushing lightly against his accidentally under the table as he shifted in his seat.

He could feel Jonathan's entire body still at the contact and decidedly would ignore it, angling his body that slight inch to the right to avoid doing so again.

This night was already weird enough.

"So Steve..." Joyce broke through his reverie, her tone light in such a way that had him on edge, "I was just wondering...since when do you and Jonathan hang out?"

"Mom!"

The older woman held her hands up in surrender before poking her fork at her meatloaf, "I'm sorry! I didn't mean for it to sound rude but —"

Steve cleared his throat, "uh well, you know, there are some things you go through with someone that just helps you get over all the shi —stuff that uh..." he faltered, feeling Jonathan's gaze burning a hole into the side of his head as he spoke, "well, you know...things can just put other stuff into perspective."

Well said, Tennessee Williams.

Joyce seemed appeased though, growing quiet, a small smile on her face as her gaze flickered between the two boys pensively. Jonathan seemed to be avoiding eye-contact altogether, glaring down at his plate as if it personally offended him.

After a moment, he heaved a sigh and muttered "I'm going to the bathroom" before standing up and walking out of the room.

Steve and Joyce watched him until he turned out of sight. The latter then reached over and placed her hand gently on his forearm, "well, I for one am glad you befriended Jonathan, Steve. You and Nancy...." she tilted her head, gaze unreadable, "you're good for him."

Before Steve could fathom trying to reply to that, a knock sounded at the Byers' front door. The older woman threw him an apologetic smile, tapping him lightly on the arm and standing up, heading over and opening the door widely, revealing a slightly wide-eyed Nancy Wheeler.

"Hi Mrs Byers is—Steve!" she exclaimed, catching sight of her boyfriend from over Joyce's shoulder.

Joyce gestured the younger woman into her home. Nancy practically raced into the kitchen, dropping a bag that looked suspiciously like it contained a gift of some sort at her feet, cerulean orbs immediately catching on his bandaged (Joyce had found the supplies) hand.

"So you did hit him," she stated rather than asked, hands on her hips.

"He did," Jonathan answered her as he entered the kitchen, arms folded across his chest, halting to stand beside her.

Steve couldn't help but be reminded of that time his mom and dad scolded him for singeing the new Persian rug. He fought the urge to hang his head and wring his hands. Barely.

"Nancy, he was—"

"I don't care, Steve. Tommy H is an idiot who just—"

"I'll just...leave you kids to it," Joyce interjected, gesturing over her shoulder and walking briskly out of the kitchen, towards her bedroom.

The teens watched her go for a moment before Nancy heaved a sigh, running a hand over her forehead and down her hair.

"Is it broken?"

Jonathan shook his head, "nah. Me and my mom checked it. At most it's sprained."

Steve fought the urge to flip him off. Barely.

Nancy looked relieved, "well, that's something at least."

A beat of silence passed.

"What the hell were you thinking, Harrington?! Weren't we just talking about how we were gonna keep our heads down and—"

"Whoa, whoa, says the girl who nearly broke Carol's arm last week?" Steve cut across her, throwing his good hand into the air in exasperation, "try practicing what you preach, Wheels."

He had her there and they all knew it.

Nancy folded her arms across her chest, subconsciously mirroring Jonathan, huffing, "well it was still pretty stupid, asshole. You have got to—"

"It was Byers that antagonised him first!"

He winced at the dizzying pitch his voice had rose as he met his girlfriend's eye, ever aware of the heavy gaze of Jonathan also boring a hole into him.

"And what, exactly? You just do whatever Jonathan does now, is that it?"

Steve stood up, breathing hard, "I wasn't just gonna stand there and let him say that shit, Nance! He can say or do whatever he wants to me, but when it comes to you and Byers, I have a goddamn line, okay?!"

A stunned silence followed that outburst where Steve tried not to read into the oddly pensive look Nancy threw his way and downright avoided Jonathan's gaze altogether.

He had no idea how many minutes passed before the latter finally piped up, "hey Nancy? You ever play Missile Command?"

Needless to say, she handed their asses to them. By a long shot. Just like most things, Nancy Wheeler took to videogames like a fish to water and neither boy really had it in him to feel jealous of that fact.

It was when Will was dropped home at 10:30pm to find the three of them huddled in front of the TV, laughing and shouting as Nancy edged closer and closer to a new record that Steve realised that this was it. This was the new normal now.

For everyone.

Huh.

"You care about him."

Had he not been stopped at a red light, Steve Harrington would have surely swerved into traffic.

"What?"

After finishing their videogame tournament, they had stayed at the Byers' until well after midnight before Nancy's mother called and demanded she come home as she had already missed her curfew by over an hour. So, she and Steve reluctantly finished up their ice cream and bid their goodbyes, leaving the Byers family to their Three Stooges marathon and hopping in his car. They had only been driving but a few minutes when Nancy let out that quiet observation as she regarded the side of her boyfriend's face in the soft glow of the streetlights.

"Don't play dumb, Harrington," she deadpanned before slapping his knee, her tone insistent, "*Jonathan*. You care about him."

Several responses fired rapidly through his brain in that moment. Most were denials, others jokes, but in the end, he settled on:

"So? You care about him too."

Judging by her face that was not what Nancy expected him to say.

"You smile more around him," he said suddenly, the words falling from his lips without his permission, "it's...nice."

He knew the crinkle between her eyebrows was there, even if he couldn't see it in the darkness.

"I—I smile around you too," she replied evenly, sounding somehow offended and apologetic at the same time.

He nodded, knowing that his face was probably a complicated mix of emotions right now and was thankful for the shroud of night.

"It's okay, Nance," he shrugged, knowing even as he said the words that she did not need his permission, "you care about him."

The words hung between them, neither heavy nor light. Just truthful.

"O-Of course I do. Jonathan—he's my friend, Steve."

Steve gave a one-shouldered shrug, his fingers flexing around the steering wheel. He could practically feel the realisation dawn on her, despite it being dark and he focussing on the road.

"He's your friend too, isn't he?"

He said nothing. He didn't need to. Neither did she.

So they didn't.

Because this was their new normal.

He was dreaming.

He had to be.

Real life was rarely this...strange.

Well, no. That wasn't true. Life had been fairly fucking strange lately, but just...not like this.

They weren't the worst dreams in the world if he was being honest. Actually, in comparison to all the freaky shit he had been dreaming about for the last few months, the smell of burning monster flesh still lingering in his nose as he clutched his bedsheets, his eyes darting around his empty room, it was downright pleasant.

But he wasn't...*like that*.

He liked girls. One in particular, very much.

It was probably just some belated PTSD bullshit, invading his mind in the dead of night, the trauma of what he went through mixing with his teenage libido and creating some sort of strange sexual by-product from all the adrenaline and shit.

Yeah, that was it.

That had to explain why for the sixth night in a row, he woke up panting and hard, the ghost of Jonathan Byer's lips on the back of his neck as Nancy wrapped her legs around him at the forefront of his racing mind. For those five nights, Steve had dreamt numerous variations of the same situation...he, Nancy and Jonathan on his bed, in various stages of undress, making each other feel good.

He refused to do anything about the inevitable hard-on he had whenever he awoke.

And it was steadily driving him crazy.

This frustration deepened as the days wore on, he steeped in inner turmoil as the two other featuring parties remained blissfully unaware as they all hung out together. Finally, it came to a head one night as he, Nancy and Jonathan sat on the Wheelers' couch and Steve, who had been getting less and less sleep to try avoid the tantalizing visions that he knew awaited him, finally succumbed to slumber during one of their movie marathons, Nancy's soft laughter at Jonathan's dry commentary ringing in his ears.

He jumped, heart racing as a hand shook his shoulder, pulling him from a very vivid dream, Jonathan's face only inches from his, his dark orbs boring a whole into him when only moments before he had had his lips wrapped around Steve's dic—

"Don't fucking touch me!"

He leapt up off the couch, shoving the other boy so roughly he stumbled to the floor.

"Steve what—"

"I gotta go," he cut across Nancy who was gaping up at him.

"No, it's fine, I'll go," Jonathan grumbled as he stood up, an indecipherable expression on his face before he pushed past Steve and headed for the door.

"Jonathan wait—"

The door slammed.

"Dammit, Steve! What is with you?" Nancy asked, anger seeping into her tone as she stormed up to him, hands on her hips.

He had no answer for her.

"Seriously, what is going on? You've been acting really weird lately

and..." she trailed off, running a hand through her hair, her eyes fixed over his shoulder to the front door, "I thought you guys were... getting along."

Oh, they were doing more than just 'getting along' whenever Steve's subconscious had any say in the matter. That sharp feeling rose from the pit of his stomach before he dragged a palm down his face and heaved a heavy sigh.

"I'll be right back."

With that, he followed Jonathan's path, jogging out onto the lawn and down the suburban street. It didn't take him long to see the shorter boy shuffling hurriedly in the distance, shoulders hunched, head down, hands shoved in his pockets. Picking up the pace, Steve soon caught up and slowed right at his side.

"You shouldn't walk with your hands in your pockets," he advised with an air of practiced nonchalance, "what if you tripped?"

Stony silence met his words.

All right then.

"Look man," he held out an arm in front of Jonathan's chest, not quite touching him but forcing him to stop lest he brush off him, "I'm sorry, okay?"

The photographer halted in his tracks, taking his hands out of his pockets and clenching them into fists at his sides.

"It's okay."

Steve shook his head.

"No, it's not. Look, I know I can be an asshole sometimes. But I—I'm working on it, okay? And—and I overreacted back there I—the truth is..." he steeled himself, not able to look the other boy in the eye as he admitted, "I've been having some pretty freaky dreams lately and you—you just...startled me, is all. I'm sorry I freaked out on you."

He felt rather than saw Jonathan look up at him.

"You've been having weird dreams too?"

See, Steve could pretty much guarantee that Byers' weird dreams had more to do with monsters and Will and his whole world going to hell in a handbasket. That was pretty understandable, was almost normal after everything he had been through. What wasn't normal, though? Having sexual fantasies about your girlfriend jerking off another guy and then having that guy jerk you before sinking to his knees and—

"Uh, yeah. I—haven't been sleeping great."

Guilt clawed up from the pit of his stomach. It's true, he hadn't been sleeping great and he did, on occasion, still have horrifying nightmares about the monster they had encountered that night but... when he forced himself to meet Jonathan's gaze, he couldn't stand the look of understanding in them interlaced with the underlined anguish that gave him an air of a young man that had already seen far too much in his short life.

Not when all of this was really down to Steve popping a few awkward boners.

"I like to think that it'll get easier," Byers said suddenly, pulling Steve from his downward guilt spiral, "but that's probably bullshit. I—Will he...he seems fine but he's not, you know? None of them are," he tilted his head, jaw clenched, "Nancy isn't...we aren't."

Deep down, they all knew that. That was what these little not-so-impromptu hang outs were all about. What they went through, they couldn't just continue on with normal life when they had seen that the world was anything but. And no one else understood. Not the students at Hawkins High, not the Tommy H's of the world, not the droning teachers, and save for Jonathan's mom, not any of their parents. All they had, the only people they could turn to when it all got too damn much...was each other.

Steve, Nancy and Jonathan.

Something clicked into place in Steve's mind then, like that missing piece of the puzzle had just materialised, understanding dawning on him.

"You're helping her you know."

The photographer frowned at his words.

"Nancy she...she hasn't been great since Barb," he continued, taking a step closer to him, "but you both went through so much together. More than just that night we fought the monster. You guys...you shared something that nobody else will ever understand and I think she's comforted by that. That's she's not alone."

That tight feeling in his chest loosened a little at that admission.

"There's nothing going on between us," the shorter boy piped up, his stance a little defensive as he understandably misunderstood where Steve was going with the conversation.

"No man, I know there's not," he was quick to clarify, his hands held up as he blew out a tired breath, "but...you love her."

It wasn't a question.

Jonathan froze, his fists clenched so tightly his knuckles were turning a ghostly white.

Steve ploughed on, "you love her. I know it, you know it, hell, she probably knows it."

A beat of silence passed between them, their mingled breaths visible puffs rising into the night's sky.

"And what...you want me to stop hanging out with her?"

Steve's eyebrows shot up his forehead, taking several steps toward him, "what? No! No I—that's not what I'm...shit. Let me start over."

Jonathan seemed to have enough of his pathetic attempts however and just started walking again, picking up his pace.

"Jonathan, wait!"

Steve stumbled after him, reaching out and grasping his shoulder, pulling him back.

Byers shrugged him off, turning on the spot, crossing his arms over his chest, breathing heavily as he waited impatiently for him to continue.

"I—"

Steve's brain raced a mile a minute as he fought to organise the jumble of words that were bouncing around his skull.

"Look, it's late, Harrington. I don't really have time for this sh—"

"We need you."

The words blurted from him and he wanted nothing more than to snatch them out of the air and shove them down his throat, but he couldn't. There it was. Out there for all to hear. For *Jonathan Byers* to hear...and they were nothing but truthful. Steve knew it as he knew the sun rose in the East and set in the West. It had lingered, the truth, a balm settling over the three teenagers ever since that faithful night, smoothing out the roughness between them over time, and now what was left was...them. Just them, who they were right now.

And right now, they were a trio, somehow.

It was a new normal, sure. But definitely the most normal in a sea of strange.

Holy shit.

"What?"

Great. Of course he'd want an explanation. What a fucking spaz.

Heat flared across Steve's cheeks and he thanked every deity he knew that it was too dark to see his tomato face as he struggled to continue:

"Nance and me...we uh need you, Jonathan. I know we...I love her and she loves me, I think. But—before you started hanging out with us, before it wasn't...it didn't...everything that went down....it didn't feel real, you know? But you experienced it all too. You were with us and you saw and now..." he ran a hand through his hair, blowing out

a breath, staring at the ground as he forced out, "when you're with us, even if it's just watching some lame movie or bitchin' about my taste in music, it feels—"

"What the hell are you two losers doing out here? Get your asses back inside before Mr Rogers turns the sprinklers on."

Nancy Wheeler, everybody.

The two guys stared as she approached them, arms wrapped around herself as she came to a halt, her eyes glittering even in the twilight as she stared between them, clearly trying to gage the atmosphere.

Steve couldn't help but bask in the wave of relief that washed over him at her presence. It seemed like temporary madness had taken hold of him yet again as his mouth took the wheel and staring swerving erratically, admitting to things like thoughts and feeling that were definitely, *definitely* just...

Nothing.

He could feel Jonathan looking at him, his gaze piercing a hole into his forehead but he stubbornly refused to look at him, instead directing his eyes to his girlfriend who was beginning to shiver.

Nodding, he murmured, "it's cold. We should get back inside."

And so they went back into the Wheelers' house, caught the tail end of Caddyshack and ate three bowls of popcorn between them. Steve's eyes started to droop again sometime around midnight and was just about to tell his girlfriend that he was going to head home when he was met with a sight that robbed him of breath.

There, to his immediately left, sat Nancy, fast asleep, her head resting against Jonathan's shoulder. The guy in question caught his gaze over her head, his eyes conveying a myriad of emotion from guilt to anxiety to defiance and contentment.

Steve merely nodded at him, gently extracting himself from the couch so he wouldn't jostle the sleeping girl too much and stared down at them, drinking in the picture they made, an inexplicable warmth spreading across his chest.

"My dad will kill me if I stay out any later," he mumbled softly before shrugging, "tell Nance I'll see her tomorrow?"

Jonathan nodded gently. They stared at one another for a beat or two, carob eyes meeting amber before Steve mentally shook himself and gave a two-fingered salute, turning on his heel and leaving, the cold air that hit his face feeling much like being harshly awoken from whatever strange trance that had befallen him.

He really needed to catch some Z's.

Preferably ones that didn't feature particular parts of Jonathan Byers' anatomy.

That night was kind to him in that everybody in his dream was fully-clothed. It was just him, Nancy and Jonathan in Steve's kitchen, much like they had been when they worked on their project. That was until the photographer leaned across the table and caught Nancy's lips in his, the petite girl humming with pleasure as she simultaneously squeezed Steve's hand in hers.

Steve squeezed back just as Jonathan leaned towards him, offering him the same lingering peck. As he pulled back, Steve could feel a small, almost shy smile on his face, the one he knew his mom said only ever made an appearance when he was truly happy.

That's when he woke up.

There was no boner this time, no sweating skin, no hammering heart. Just that same feeling that he had been having for a while now.

One he thought he finally had the name for.

"Oh shit."

Okay. So admittedly, this is getting a little out of hand. I *am* toying with the idea of making it into a series where I explore Jonathan and Nancy's POVs respectively so I can interweave them all, but that may be a ways down the road and probably will only come to pass if there's interest. Still, hope you like this little experiment of mine :)

NEXT CHAPTER TEASER:

"I apologised to Jonathan for the other night," he murmured, rubbing the back of his neck, "I—I haven't been sleeping great. I've been having these really weird dreams—"

"About Jonathan."

Steve's heart leapt into his throat, dark eyes bulging as he gaped at Nancy, her posture relaxed, giving nothing away.

"W-What?" he breathed, desperately trying to taper down his sudden urge to flee.

"You've been dreaming about Jonathan," Nancy continued, her tone gentle but her face steadily blank.

3. Chapter Three: The Acceleration

Have Happened

By Cortexikid

Chapter Three: The Acceleration

There's totally a *Community* reference in this chapter. I just couldn't help myself. Abed would be ashamed of me for messing with the time-line.

He wasn't freaking out.

He was *not* freaking out.

He was kinda freaking out.

And Nancy knew it.

"Okay, that's it," the girl in question sighed, turning in her seat as he drove them to school on Friday morning, "what the hell is going on with you, Harrington?"

Steve would later vehemently deny the high-pitched yelp that escaped his throat as she caught him off guard as well as the very noticeable swerve he took into the opposite lane before managing to correct himself.

"N-Nothing Nance, I'm—"

"*Do not* insult my intelligence, Steve."

Her tone cut him like glass.

He knew a lost cause when he saw one.

"Pull over," she instructed just as Hawkins High came into view up ahead. He did as he was told, coming to a halt at the side of the road, pointedly ignoring the figures of his classmates walking in the near

distance and turning off the ignition.

The car grew deathly silent as the engine's rumbling cut off. He could feel the weight of her gaze on him, more than lingering, less than penetrating, just...present in a way that she always was. His ever-betraying heart ratcheted in his chest as he stared down at the steering wheel, brain scrambling for something, anything to say. But as always, she beat him to the punch.

"Has this something to do with the other night?"

Neither had to clarify what night she meant. The image of him startling awake, shoving Jonathan to the floor and attempting to bolt was fresh in both of their minds.

"Did you guys...not work things out?" she asked tentatively.

Oh they worked some things out, all right. Steve worked out that Jonathan was in love with Nancy (not that that was ever really up for debate) and Jonathan worked out that Steve was pretty much achingly dependent on him and their budding friendship. Well, really it was less 'working out' on Jonathan's part and more 'bearing his soul' on Steve's part, but whatever.

Steve barely hid a grimace as he remembered the sheer look of shock and confusion on Byers' face as he uttered, "me and Nance...we need you."

Truth was, he wasn't sure himself exactly what he had meant by that. All he knew was that when Jonathan Byers was around, Nancy smiled more, her face that little less gaunt, her eyes a little less distant. And he...he felt okay. Content, even. Which after all they had seen, monsters and superpowered-girls and alternate dimensions, was pretty damn normal. And he desperately wanted to feel normal again. It was when he dug a little deeper into that contentedness that he felt anything but.

"You ever feel like you have no idea who you really are?"

The question left his lips before he could really think about it. He wasn't sure what made him blurt it out, wasn't sure if that really was

the question he had wanted to ask her, but it was out now. Too late to take it back.

"Steve..."

He turned his head at her voice. Their eyes met.

"We're sixteen. I'm not sure we're supposed to know who we are yet."

There was something in those words, something she was not saying but he heard anyway. She didn't know who she was either. Feared that in a world like this, she never would. But that was okay, because they knew each other. They had each other. And Jonathan.

The three of them against the world.

Somehow, that was how it was now.

And it worked.

"I apologised to Jonathan for the other night," he murmured, rubbing the back of his neck, "I—I haven't been sleeping great. I've been having these really weird dreams—"

"About Jonathan."

Steve's heart leapt into his throat, dark eyes bulging as he gaped at Nancy, her posture relaxed, giving nothing away.

"W-What?" he breathed, desperately trying to taper down his sudden urge to flee.

"You've been dreaming about Jonathan," Nancy continued, her tone gentle but her face steadily blank.

Steve gripped the wheel, his knuckles turning white as he heard her shift in her seat before a hand landed gently on his forearm.

"You fell asleep last night, just after I got off the phone with Jonathan. I..." her voice faltered and Steve didn't dare look at her, focussing all his attention instead on trying not to suffocate under the weight of his impending panic attack.

He and Nance had gotten a few hours to themselves at the Wheeler's last night, Holly and her parents having gone out to see some kids movie (to Mr Wheeler's obvious dismay) and Mike locked up in his room doing god-knows-what. But instead of taking the opportunity for some long-awaited necking, Steve had capped off the evening by falling asleep on the couch. It wasn't his smoothest moment.

"I overheard you. You were talking in your sleep."

Inhale.

"It was a little funny at first," she admitted, her tone a mix of teasing and apologetic, "you were moaning my name and I thought it'd be kinda funny if Mike accidentally overheard you having a sex dream about his sister—"

Steve couldn't control the guffaw that escaped him.

"But then you said Jonathan's name. Right after mine. All in the same breath."

Exhale.

"He's in love with you."

The words hung heavily between them, draped over the car like an invisible tarp. It wasn't what he meant to say at all. A denial, a flat out lie had been poised on his lips, ready to take its place centre-stage. But he couldn't lie to Nancy. He wouldn't. So he deflected, evaded. Hell, he threw Byers under the bus.

Guess some things never changed.

"He tell you that?"

She sounded disbelieving, weary, far too tired even for eight in the morning.

"He didn't have to, Nance. It's all over his face."

He finally turned to look at her.

Just like it's all over yours.

He hadn't spoken those words, but he may as well have.

They knew each other far too well to hide anything on their faces. He wished he was more surprised by what he saw on hers.

Guilt. Sadness. Longing. Elation.

Each emotion crossed her features, flashing one by one in her wide eyes before a solitary one dominated. One he was far too familiar with. Stubbornness.

"Well, I love *you*, Steve Harrington."

It wasn't the first time he had heard those words. Hell, it wasn't even the first girl he had heard them from. But it was the first time it sounded close to the truth.

"I love you too, Nancy Wheeler."

Amber orbs met cerulean.

A tentative knock on the passenger side window made them both jump, they whipping around to be met by a familiar sheepish grin and half-wave. Nancy huffed more in relief than annoyance as she rolled down the window and fixed Jonathan Byers with her best unimpressed glare.

"Steve's right, Jonathan. You really need to start wearing a bell."

She gave him a light punch in the arm to let him know she was kidding before waving her hands at him in a shooing motion and opening her door, stepping out into the early-morning air, Steve leaning over the seat to look out the far-side window.

"You walk, Byers?"

Their conversation temporarily on hold, Steve was determined to inject some normalcy into the situation, into his tone, his posture, the air around them if he could. He knew that Nancy wouldn't let his sleep-talking debacle go forever, so he grabbed mundane, crippling

normality with both damn hands and hung on as if his life depended on it.

Jonathan shrugged down at him, "my Mom has the car."

Steve rolled his eyes, "why didn't you call me, dude? I would've picked you up."

The sheer look of confusion and surprise that etched onto the other boy's face at those words hurt Steve's mortal soul. It was if the idea had never even crossed Jonathan's mind, was something wholly unfathomable like a magic portal to another dimension or suddenly developing rather confusing feelings for your very male friend.

And Steve was fairly certain Jonathan could only fathom one of those things.

"Well, you can always give him a ride home," Nancy's voice broke through his reverie, leaning her elbows down on the open window, staring at him with an indecipherable expression on her face, her tone decidedly light, "right?"

"Right," Steve nodded, a fog falling over his brain at the thought of being alone in close proximity with Jonathan Byers after his subconscious had morphed into some surreal 70s porno from his dad's not-so-secret stash he found in the basement when he was nine.

Except, you know, with more dude-on-dude stuff.

Vehemently shaking his head, he threw them both a wry grin and two-fingered salute as he started back up the engine.

"I think you two can walk the rest of the way."

He didn't wait for a response, pressing the gas and speeding away, laughing at Nancy's faux-scandalized glare and Jonathan's smirk in the rear-view mirror. His cool departure was somewhat dampened by the fact that the high school parking lot was only a few hundred yards away, but never let it be said that Steve Harrington was the type to let an opportunity to mess with his friends pass him by.

And that's what they were. His friends. Better friends than he could

ever remember having.

If only he could make his subconscious get on board with what you do and don't do with your friends. Especially the male ones. He had briefly entertained the idea of going to the library, try research whatever the fuck could be going on with him, but he had no idea where the hell to start. The fact that Nancy now suspected...hell-if-he-knew, was something he couldn't figure out he was relieved or terrified by.

He hoped an entire day of classroom monotony was enough to alleviate the trepidation that was rising from his gut, hoped it was enough to get Nancy Wheeler to drop whatever lead she thought she was on to...

This was a terrible idea.

Like, legit one of the worst ideas he had ever been involved in.

Hell, it was right up there with trying to fight a faceless monster with nothing but a baseball bat and dumb luck on his side.

"You want us to...have a sleepover?"

Jonathan's tone said it all really. It was such a dumb idea. And generally speaking, Nancy Wheeler didn't have dumb ideas.

"Well, it won't be a *sleepover*. We're not twelve," she huffed, giving Byers a little shove, "it's just, my parents will be gone and I don't wanna fend for myself against four pre-pubescent boys all night," she paused, folding her arms and tilting her head, "so, I was thinking that you guys could...help? Maybe?"

It was the weekend before Mike Wheeler's thirteenth birthday and Mr and Mrs Wheeler were going away to celebrate their eighteenth wedding anniversary. As such, the middle child and his friends decided that it would be the opportune moment to have the ultimate Dungeons and Dragons game, just Mike, Lucas, Dustin and Will against the gorgonzola or whatever.

Steve was fairly certain that that wasn't the actual name of the

monster but couldn't find it in himself to care. Ever since fighting a real one, he wasn't much in the mood to entertain thoughts of others, even the fictional kind.

"Come on, I know *you* don't have any plans," Nancy pressed, pointing him sharply in the shoulder from where she leaned against his locker before casting a glance at Jonathan, "and I know *you* changed shifts at work to make sure to be home for Will. But...Will's gonna be at *my* house. So, you may as well be too."

Okay, he had to admit, it wasn't such a crazy idea all laid out like that. And really, any other time Steve would jump at the chance to have some quality time with Nancy. But since his little...revelation in bed the other night, he was more and more reluctant to spend any time with Jonathan outside of school.

And Nancy was clearly starting to notice.

If he didn't know any better, he would say that she orchestrated all this to force the two of them to hang out without the pretence of homework. But somehow, Steve didn't think his girlfriend had any real control over when her parents conceived her little brother, so that may have been a bit of a stretch.

"I'm in," he forced himself to shrug, not nearly as nonchalantly as he would have liked, but there was no way he was letting Nancy know that her little digging expedition was getting to him.

There was a beat in which he decidedly did not look in Jonathan's direction.

"Me too."

His tone sounded like Steve felt – weary.

That seemed good enough for Nancy though as she just threw them both a smile, fixed the strap of her back pack and turned on the spot, "great! See you guys at seven!"

He and Jonathan watched her go, weaving in and out of bodies until she turned a corner and out of sight. Steve could sense Byers' gaze shifting towards him, burning a whole into the side of his face.

Fuck.

"Hey man," he began lowly, glancing around them for a moment before taking a minute step closer to Steve, "I know you and Nancy don't get much...alone time anymore, so if you want, I can—"

Steve reached up and clasped his shoulder, cutting him off. A surge of determination flowed through his veins, from where he had no clue, but it was potent enough for a jumble of words to fall from his lips without permission, "don't think you're gettin' outta this so easy, Byers. If I have to spend my Friday night making sure some snot-nosed kids get to pretend-fight a dragon or whatever, you do too."

They were standing too close together. Somewhere in the recesses of his mind, Steve knew that. Was hyper-aware that they were in the middle of a busy high school hallway where pretty much anyone with functioning eyes could see them. That somehow made his fingers dig into Jonathan's shoulder even tighter as he shifted a little, the toes of his sneakers pressing against the other boy's.

Double fuck.

Their gazes met and for a fraction of a second, it was as if all the air had been sucked out of the room. He had been having dreams that started off something like this. Except it wasn't school they were in, no, never school, always somewhere more comfortable and a lot more horizontal. That thought almost made Steve jerk back and away from Jonathan, but thankfully the other boy took that moment to slowly nod his reply.

"Sure Harrington, I'll help you fend off snotty kids and invisible dragons. Wouldn't be the craziest thing we've ever done, right?"

Steve pushed down the surge of warmth that spread across his chest, his hand involuntarily patting Jonathan's shoulder one last time and letting it fall back down to his side before it could do anything even more stupid like touch his hair or brush against his cheek.

Triple fuck.

This was going to be the longest Friday night of his life.

Will Byers was a...strange kid.

Not a loser or a freak or anything else that assholes said about him, that he and Tommy H had once said about him before Steve grew the fuck up, but just...odd in a way that wasn't disconcerting, but intriguing. This was no more apparent than when Steve watched the four pre-teens set up their Dungeon and Dragons campaign at seven-thirty that night and focussed on how Will was, *really* was, after everything that had gone down.

By and large, the kid seemed fine. Better than fine. He was smiling and laughing and engaging in conversation with his friends like any other twelve year old. But there were moments, even in the short while Steve, Nancy and Jonathan stood down in the basement at the start of the night, where Will would grow silent, pensive, seemingly a million miles away from earth. And now that Steve had noticed it, it was all he could see whenever he looked at him.

The...distance in his young gaze.

"Alright, you guys have fun. If you want anything, you know where the kitchen is," Nancy called out as she climbed the stairs, Steve and Jonathan on her heels.

"Thanks Nancy!" a chorus of voices replied before Mike cleared his throat, adopting a weirdly deeper tone as he called out: "an arrow flies through the air over Brutalitops. Goblins are running toward you from the treeline, wielding daggers!"

They really were a bunch of little weirdos.

Oddly charming in their own way, but definitely weird as fuck.

He was glad they had each other, though. The four of them had been through so much in their short lives – Will and Mike in particular. Steve had caught the same distance, the same pensive far-away expression cross the younger Wheeler's face on more than one occasion too. He started calling it the 'Eleven face' in his head. While he may not have gotten the pleasure of meeting the superpowered girl with the buzz cut, he had heard plenty about her. Mostly from Nancy, a little from Jonathan, but never from Mike.

He knew a broken heart when he saw one.

It had only been – hell, had it really only been three months? It felt like a life-time. Several life-times since Steve's entire world-view was tipped on its axis, and he was only there for the grand finale. These kids, they had been there since act one scene one, had gone through trials and tribulations he couldn't even fathom.

Which was why he had agreed to chaperone their sleepover. They needed this, some normalcy, some mundane after a whirlwind of weird. Steve knew how that felt, knew the yearning for something tangible, something he could hold on to and understand when everything felt confusing and terrifying and...something he wasn't sure he'd ever understand if he lived to be a hundred years old.

"—eve? Steve?"

He was snapped out of his reverie by a familiar voice, but not one he expected. Glancing down, he met the hazel gaze of Will Byers who had his head tilted at him, an indistinguishable expression on his face. With a frown, he was brought back to the present, where he stood in the Wheeler's kitchen, a bowl of popcorn in his hands, listening to the chatter and laughter coming from the living room where Nancy and Jonathan sat on the couch watching some movie Jonathan had picked up called *Harold and Maude*.

"Are you okay?" the younger Byers asked, his tone soft, as if he spoke any louder Steve would spook like a horse that saw a mouse.

Honestly, Steve couldn't say he didn't feel a little like that. The question, while innocuous, still felt jarring, as if there was no clear-cut answer.

Because there wasn't.

"I'm fine," he forced himself to reply with a shake of his head, "what about you?"

Now *that* was a loaded question. And Will knew it.

"I'm fine," he responded in much the same way before gesturing to the cupboard behind him, "I'm on snack duty."

Steve made a grand gesture of bowing and motioning toward the cabinet, "go, fulfil your duty, good Sir!"

Will chuckled at his lameness, struggling to reach up to grab the Chee-tos, his fingers still inches away even as he stood on his tip-toes. Taking pity on him, Steve reached over to snatch them up, but before he could, Will surprised him by surging upward, jumping several inches off the floor and clasping them tightly in his hands.

Once his feet were firmly back on the floor, Will smiled gently, nodding towards the living room.

"Jonathan got you to watch *Harold and Maude*, huh?"

Steve's gaze followed Will's out to where his brother and Nancy were curled up watching the odd love story unfold out of the unlikely pair. Steve could honestly say he had never seen a movie quite like it and certainly would never have watched it of his own volition. But in saying that, he found himself strangely enthralled by it. By the... uniqueness of their connection. He had never been exposed to anything like it, a relationship so...complex and matchless and taboo.

Only minutes before his gaze had flickered from the television to his right where Nancy and Jonathan sat beside him, pressed close together, Nancy's left thigh brushing Steve's as Steve's hand that had fallen to the back of the couch, lightly rested an inch from Jonathan's shoulder.

Before he knew it, he had leapt up off the couch, an exclamation of needing more popcorn bursting from his lips, he all but running to the kitchen.

"Yeah he—he recommended it," he answered the kid, left hand rubbing the back of his neck, "it's uh...something."

Will laughed at that, full-bellied and sounding so much like his older brother that it shocked Steve.

"Yeah, it's a really weird movie. But I like it. It's cool to see something so different be so...normal, right?"

Yeah. Will Byers was a strange kid.

Steve pointed to the chips, "you better get those down to your brethren, they must be hungry by now."

Something flashed across Will's face in that moment, so quick that Steve thought he imagined it.

"Yeah, you're right," he grinned enigmatically, taking a step back towards the basement, nodding, "you better get back to your brethren too. They must miss you by now."

With that, he turned on his heel and walked out of the room. Steve watched him go, feeling wholly exposed, as if he just gave away state secrets while naked or something. Shaking his head, he gripped the bowl of popcorn even tighter and made his way back into the living room. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Nancy and Jonathan exchange a split-second glance before she shuffled away from him, leaving a large enough space for Steve to take a seat.

Trying not to read too much into it, he sat himself down, right between the two, just as the old lady was saying, "a lot of people enjoy being dead. But they are not dead, really. They're just backing away from life. *Reach* out. Take a *chance*. Get *hurt* even. But play as well as you can. Go team, go! Give me an L. Give me an I. Give me a V. Give me an E. L-I-V-E. LIVE!"

Something settled into his chest then as he gave a quick glance to Nancy on his left and Jonathan on his right.

Huh...maybe that old broad was onto something.

He was warm. Comfortably warm, wrapped in a cocoon of it. He never wanted to leave. From this moment on, this was where he would live. With his face buried in this soft pillow that was rising and lowering gently, the motion rocking him steadily back to unconsciousness. Yep, it was decided. He was staying right here. He would eat, sleep—

"You think we should wake him?"

A gentle rumbling reverberated around Steve's head at that.

"Nah, let him sleep. He's been really tired lately."

A pause.

"Unless your shoulder is going numb. Then wake him up."

Another pause.

"No it's...it's okay. I don't mind."

The vibration against Steve's head was softer this time, so soft that he could easily drift back off...if he hadn't suddenly realized what the vibration *was* and why his *pillow* was most definitely moving.

Holy shit, Harrington! You fell asleep on Byers' shoulder, you dumb fuck! Don't freak out, don't freak out, STOP FREAKING OUT!

"Has he...talked to you about the weird dreams he's been having?" Jonathan asked Nancy above Steve's head, his voice a half-whisper over the murmuring of the TV.

Steve's heart constricted in his chest as he waited on his girlfriend's response.

"He mentioned he was finding it hard to sleep, yeah," she mumbled, confusion lacing her tone, "has he said something to you?"

Steve had a feeling that if he could have, Jonathan would have taken that moment to shrug. Since his shoulder was otherwise occupied however, he settled for a non-committal hum.

"He mentioned something the other night after he—when he... freaked out and shoved me."

A knot of discomfort tightened in Steve's stomach.

Nancy gave her own hum in response, apparently thinking over Jonathan's words. But it seemed like he wasn't finished.

"I just...he...he knows we—you—are there for him, right? That he doesn't have to..." Jonathan trailed off, a sigh falling from his lips, "Tommy has been making his life hell. Writing shit on his locker,

leaving dead birds in his car. I just—I don't want that asshole making things worse for him."

Well, shit.

Steve was hyper-aware that he had gone too still, that he had stopped breathing and that if he was to feign sleep, he would have to do a hell of a better job. But with those words reverberating around his skull, Byers' low tone a balm over the sting that was his ex-best friend's antics, he just couldn't force himself to relax.

Time for Plan B.

Summoning every second of the one acting lesson he had in sixth grade, he let out a heavy sigh, and started shifting his entire body from off of Jonathan only to bite down a yelp when he felt a hand clasp down on his thigh, holding him in place.

A beat. Two beats. Three...

The sound of a mechanical click temporarily overrode the shock of having Jonathan's palm pressed against his upper thigh for three whole seconds.

"Nancy!" Jonathan hissed.

"What?" she replied, smile evident in her tone, "I had to, Jonathan. You guys are just so cute."

Steve didn't have to be the Chief to piece together what had just happened. One day, in the not-too-distant future, Jonathan Byers would be standing in his dark room developing a picture of Steve drooling on his shoulder.

Awesome.

Nancy Wheeler in all her infinite glory, came to his rescue barely ten minutes later, pulling him off Jonathan and shaking him gently to 'wake' him, murmuring that he could get some fresh air as she and Jonathan made sure the boys were done with their game for the night.

Steve was sorely tempted to take her up on that offer, especially if his face was as red as it felt from where he doggedly avoided Byers' eye line, but ultimately, he decided to take the high road and drag his sorry ass down to the basement to break up whatever fantasy duel was taking place there.

"Aww, come on, five more minutes!" Will exclaimed as Steve descended the stairs, hot on Jonathan's heels.

"Mrs Wheeler said ten, guys," Steve remarked as Jonathan fixed his little brother with a knowing look.

Mike stood up from his seat, walked over to the teens and folded his arms across his chest, "she *did* say ten. But you know what she *didn't* say?"

Steve wouldn't rise to the bait. He knew the smug expression on the younger Wheeler all too well to fall for that.

"That Nancy could have her two boyfriends stay over."

Oh yeah. He should have seen that coming.

"So, what do you say?" Mike continued, unfolding his arms and walking around them, looking them up and down, head tilted, "we won't tell if you won't."

That little shit.

"How about a compromise?"

The six boys turned to the stairs where Nancy now stood at the top, hands on her hips, staring down at them all, eyebrow quirked.

The basement fell deathly silent until Dustin piped up, toothless grin wide and cheerful, "hi, Nancy!"

Mike rolled his eyes, glaring up at his sister.

"What kinda compromise?"

As far as compromises went, Steve had to concede that it was a good

one. The boys got to stay up past ten and Steve and Jonathan got to crash on Nancy's bedroom floor without any awkward questions arising or any parents squealed to. It was a win-win.

"This is it? You want us to watch some fireworks instead of finishing our campaign? Really?"

Steve couldn't blame Mike for feeling a little confused, no doubt waiting for the catch. He was himself and one glance around him proved that the rest of the guys were too. But Nancy merely nodded, an enigmatic expression on her face as she lay down three blankets in the Wheeler's back yard.

Throwing up his arms in a 'what can you do' motion, he took a seat on one of the blankets, Will and Dustin (arms laden with snacks, the little geniuses) taking another and Mike and Lucas (after a brief bewildered glance) took the last.

Only Nancy and Jonathan remained standing, the latter leaning down and uttering in a hushed tone that Steve was one hundred per cent certain he wasn't meant to overhear:

"How the hell did you pull this off, Wheeler?"

"I have my ways, Byers."

Something passed between them then. Steve forced himself to stare at his hands, feigning temporary deafness.

"Thank you, Nancy. You've—you've no idea how much this means to him...to me."

At those words, Steve found his attention drawn to Will who he now noticed was practically vibrating with excitement as he animatedly informed Dustin that he hadn't seen fireworks this close since the 4th of July back when he was in second grade.

Steve had a feeling that was in or around the time Lonnie left town. He also had a feeling that he had a fair idea just what this meant to Will...and Jonathan.

Out of his peripheral vision, he saw Nancy reach out and squeeze

Jonathan's hand before practically shoving him down onto the blanket to Steve's left and taking a seat the far side. It was now Jonathan that was cocooned in between the other two, three heads tilted high to the sky, the laughter and chatter of pre-teen boys filling the night air as they waited for the show to start.

Mere moments passed before the first tell-tale crack sounded, followed a split second later by reds and greens and yellows erupting in the sky above them.

"Whoa!"

"Awesome!"

"No way!"

As a chorus of enthusiastic voices exclaimed around him, Steve felt his gaze drawn not above, but to the view beside him. To two pale faces that were suddenly awash with purples and neon pinks and blues. To two pairs of eyes that shone as bright as the stars. To matching, child-like grins and dimpled cheeks. It was a quite the sight to behold and he knew right then and there as he stared at the two people closest in the world to him, that he could no longer ignore his revelation from the other night.

He was undoubtedly, irrefutably, one hundred per cent, fucked.

"You're something else you know that, Wheeler?" Steve murmured into his girlfriend's shoulder as they all walked back into the house twenty minutes later, a buzz of excitement around them, the ambience light and charged with glee.

Will had not stopped smiling since the fireworks began and as such, neither did Jonathan. Steve was fairly certain this was the longest he had ever seen the elder sibling hold any expression on his face, let alone one of quiet happiness. The Byers brothers were quite the pair when elated. It was downright infectious.

"And don't you forget it," Nancy replied cheekily, checking his hip with hers before calling over her shoulder, "all right, boys. Time for

bed."

Steve restrained himself from making a smart remark. Barely.

After another twenty minutes of moaning and procrastinating and requesting for multiple glasses of water, the four friends had finally settled themselves down in the basement, snuggled into their sleeping bags, top to toe, just outside the fort that they always left mysteriously vacant.

Anyone worth their salt knew well that exactly zero sleeping would be done that night, that they were more than likely going to pick right up where they left off in their game as soon as the teens went back upstairs, but short of keeping watch over them in the basement till dawn, nothing could be done.

So, Steve, Nancy and Jonathan bid them goodnight, climbing the stairs back up to the Wheeler's kitchen. As she filled her own glass with water, Nancy did a poor job at stifling a yawn with the back of her hand.

"Wow. Sorry. Long...day," she mumbled, another yawn wracking her body.

Steve and Jonathan exchanged a quick glance before the former piped up, "hey Nance, if you wanna hit the hay, go ahead. Me and Byers can entertain ourselves."

She met his gaze, a question weaving between them, but remaining silent.

After a beat, or two, or twenty, (Steve couldn't really keep track, distracted instead by the hammering in his ears at her pensive expression as she glanced between them) she nodded, muttering "just don't break anything", leaning up on her tip-toes and brushing her lips quickly against his in a chaste kiss.

Before he could move an inch, Nancy moved onto Jonathan, doing the same, brushing her lips dangerously close to the edge of his mouth. A surge of *something* injected itself directly into Steve's gut at that sight, his breathing hitching a little as Nancy rocked back on her

heels, pulling away from Jonathan slowly and staring up at them both.

"Good night," she murmured lowly, cerulean orbs shining brightly, flashing with something inexplicable.

"Good night Nancy," they answered in unison, watching mutely as she turned and walked through the living room and up the stairs without a backwards glance.

Neither boy said anything for several moments, the room engulfed in a silence neither knew how to identify.

"You drool in your sleep."

Well, that was one way to break the ice.

"Fuck you, Byers."

"According to Tom—"

Jonathan let out a small chuckle, unable to finish the sentence as he turned to him, finally meeting his gaze, dark eyes glinting with mischief.

"No but, I mean it. You really do. I have a giant wet patch on my—"

Steve shoved him towards the living room, grumbling under his breath, "You may wanna re-think that sentence, Byers."

They spent the next thirty minutes eating the last of the popcorn, *The Thing* droning on in the background as they crunched on kernels and bitched about Mr McCauley's latest pop quiz.

"Oh come on!" Steve scoffed at one particular point, throwing his hands up at the TV in frustration, "is THAT actually meant to be scary? It's almost like—"

"The writer has never seen a real monster before?" Jonathan interjected wryly, eyebrow quirked.

That drew him up short, the memory shuddering through the both of

them simultaneously.

Steve bit his lip, steeling himself to finally ask the question that he had been wanting to ask for a while now.

"Hey man," he turned in his spot on the couch, his knee knocking against Jonathan's thigh as he forced himself to make eye-contact, "how are you doing? You know...with...everything."

He winced at his lameness but it was too late to take it back now.

Byers didn't leave him hanging as long as he had expected, though.

"I'm—" he swallowed before shifting in his seat, mirroring Steve's position, their right knees pressed against each other. "I'm better than Will is," Jonathan admitted quietly, hands tightly clasped, looking physically fatigued from uttering such a thing aloud.

"Not that that would be hard," he continued, gaze falling to his tightly wound hands that were rubbing against each other almost in a soothing motion, "he's...I'm worried about him."

Steve shoved down the urge to rest his fingers on the other boy's tense hands.

"Isn't he in therapy?"

Jonathan tilted his head, eyes still lowered, "well, yeah. But I mean, it isn't like he can talk about monsters coming out of the walls and being stuck in an alternate world without being carted off to the nut house so..."

The rest of that sentence went without saying.

What Will was going through was uncharted territory to say the least. Ain't no doctor alive or dead that could deal with that.

"I just..." Byers whispered, squeezing his eyes shut, "I wish I knew how to help him."

"You are helping him, Jonathan," Steve said automatically, not having to think about the words for a fraction of a second. "You're the

best big brother I've ever seen."

The other boy snorted at that but he could do nothing to hide the flush that had swept across his face.

Steve found himself staring at him, basked in the eerie glow of the television with his crimson cheeks and floppy hair and closed eyes.

Steve wanted to punch him.

Except not really.

He wanted to do everything but.

What the fuck was wrong with him?

"No, no you are," he forced himself to continue, trying to push aside his wandering thoughts, "you and Nancy, you're great older siblings. You warm the lonely heart of this poor only child."

Jonathan's eyes crept open at that, blinking at him.

"Oh yeah?"

Steve knew when he was being teased.

"Yeah," he affirmed quietly, heat spreading across his face as he swiped a hand out in front of him, "Will's lucky to have someone who listens to him and is actually interested in what he has to say. Must be nice."

He didn't have to meet Jonathan's eye to know the expression he saw there.

"People are interested in what you have to say, Steve," he responded just as lowly as if he were afraid that if he spoke any louder, he would burst whatever bubble had surrounded them.

He and his little brother were so alike at times.

Steve laughed humourlessly, "nah, not really. I mean, I used to think they were, back when Tommy and I..." he trailed off, rubbing the

back of his neck, "but I get now that it was only 'cause they were intimidated by us. By Tommy mostly and me by association."

He cleared his throat, fidgeting a little, picking at a loose thread (Nancy's mother would be horrified) on the Wheeler's couch. "They weren't ever my friends. Not really," he shook his head, huffing out a tired breath, "and it took you punching me in the face to make me finally realise that."

He looked up, finally meeting Jonathan's dark eyes.

"I never properly apologised, Byers. For what I said that day."

Jonathan shrugged, "I think saving my ass from a giant mon—"

"No, no. Please just—just let me..." Steve interjected, his heart doing the conga in his chest, but he had to get these words out before they killed him.

He leaned forward ever so slightly, his knee pushing up against Jonathan's heavily as he forced himself to maintain eye contact with the other boy, "I didn't mean any of that shit I said. None of it. I just...I was so..." he shook his head, running a hand through his hair, "there's no excuse. I was an asshole. To Nancy and to you. What I said about your dad, your mom, Will...I—" the words caught in his throat.

Steve swallowed once, twice, before heaving a deep breath, "I'm sorry, Jonathan."

Their eyes locked.

Slowly, Jonathan nodded, "thanks, Steve."

The air was charged with tension as they continued to stare at one another, not nearly enough of acceptable space between them. Eventually, after a few seconds or several days, Jonathan broke eye contact and shrugged, muttering, "you were right about my dad, though. Screw-up is just the tip of the ice-berg for Lonnie Byers."

Whatever spell had befallen them broke with those few words. Steve forced himself to sit back, to shift several inches from him as he asked lowly, "has uh...has he tried to contact Will since...?"

Jonathan shook his head.

Steve let out a heavy sigh.

"Asshole."

Jonathan huffed, it half-way between a sigh and a laugh, "yeah, he is."

They sat in companionable silence for another twenty minutes until the credits started rolling on *The Thing*. Wordlessly, they stood up, Steve walking over to switch off the TV as Jonathan gathered up the bowls and glasses to put them in the sink. Once all cleared up, they quietly traipsed up the stairs towards Nancy's room. Jonathan halted just outside the door, an unreadable expression on his face. Rolling his eyes, Steve merely tugged him by the sleeve, switching off the hallway light and plunging them into darkness.

Slowly, he opened the door, pushing Jonathan through ahead of him. Over the shorter boy's shoulder he could see Nancy in bed, fast asleep, her face illuminated by the moonlight seeping in through the partially open drapes. It was in that moment he realised he still had a hold of Jonathan's sleeve.

He jumped a little, brushing his fingers against Jonathan's accidentally before letting the fabric drop. It was too dark to see the expression on either of their faces so they decidedly ignored the situation and set about changing out of their clothes. Steve's pulse was racing in his veins as he turned his back on Byers and began unbuttoning his jeans. He could hear the other boy doing the same, the soft thud of shoes being pulled off and the rustling of heavy material hitting the bedroom floor.

Quickly and with averted eyes, they each turned in their boxers and T-shirts to their respective sleeping bags. It was here that Steve noticed that Nancy had arranged it so that they were face-to-face and not top-to-toe. Jonathan seemed to realise this at the exact same moment, his gaze heavy as it landed somewhere of the vicinity of Steve's shoulder. Still, the shorter boy ploughed on, kneeling onto the floor, shifting into the sleeping bag and leaving Steve standing there gormlessly staring down at him before he eventually got with the

programme, his brain powering back on and forcing him to move.

Once he settled down, he stared up at the ceiling, resting his hands behind his head.

Barely a foot between them, the two boys lay in silence before Jonathan softly whispered, his face turned toward him, "good night, Steve."

Turning his head, Steve traced the outline of Byers' body as he lay next to him, a pool of warmth forming in the pit of his stomach at the sight. Softly, he murmured back, "good night, Jonathan."

Good night Elizabeth, good night Jim Bob...Jesus Harrington, you're so unbelievably fucked.

NEXT CHAPTER TEASER:

Steve's eyes bugged comically in his skull as his head whipped around painfully fast to his left, only to see the sleeping form of Jonathan Byers, curled on his side, oddly-tranquil face barely an inch from his shoulder.

"Uh...Nance?" he mumbled, his voice an octave too high, gaze frozen on the other boy, "why am I in the middle?"

He heard her chuckle over his shoulder, "that would be because being in the middle of you two was like trying to sleep in an oven. So, I swapped places with you during the night."

"Huh."

4. Chapter Four: The Accession

Have Happened

By Cortexikid

Chapter Four: The Accession

What was that noise?

It was too dark. Were his eyes still closed?

No.

There was that noise again.

Steve blinked several times, trying to get his eyes to adjust to the darkness. Beside him, he could hear the slow and steady breathing of Jonathan Byers but that wasn't the noise that woke him.

Whimpering.

There it was again.

He was on Nancy's bedroom floor. Wrapped up like a burrito in a sleeping bag.

And Nancy was having a nightmare.

"Steve?"

A flush of hot breath landed on his cheek as Jonathan turned his head towards him, quiet tone laced with concern.

"Is that—"

"Yeah," he interjected, sitting up on the floor and beginning to unzip his sleeping bag.

He could feel the other boy beside him, copying his movements but before he could question it, Nancy let out a pained cry. Scrambling

frantically, Steve tripped when he tried to stand up inside the sleeping bag, nearly jumping out of his skin as two hands caught him by his very bare shoulders as he stumbled backwards.

"Whoa, you okay?" Jonathan asked, breath hot on his neck, palms burning dual holes into his skin.

Suddenly, Steve was transported to a very different scenario that involved Jonathan Byers' breath against the back of his neck, his strong arms on his shoulders and cursed his subconscious for what felt like the millionth time. Nancy was upset, this was *not* the time for his confusing sexual feelings.

"Thanks," he forced himself to reply as he righted himself and properly unzipped the bag, letting it pool to the floor.

It was then that he was painfully aware that he wore nothing but his boxers, having discarded his T-shirt sometime during the night due to the odd March heat. He couldn't let himself feel awkward about it though as he turned and made his way over to Nancy's bedside to where she was beginning to thrash wildly, muttering over and over.

"N-No—please don't. No! Bar—"

"Nancy, wake up," he whispered, shaking her firmly, grasping her upper arm.

Jonathan had walked around the other side of the bed and halted, his hand hovering several inches above Nancy's left arm as if second-guessing the movement.

"No! Don't! BAR—"

Both Steve and Jonathan shook her then, one arm each, calling a little louder, "wake up, Nancy!"

She shot up in the bed, a curtain of hair falling in her face, bedsheets tangled around her knees as she gasped, her chest heaving, her iron-grip closing around Steve's wrist and Jonathan's hand simultaneously.

"W-What?" Her voice was small, almost child-like as she shook off the vestiges of sleep, letting reality wash over her.

Steve bent to meet her eye-line, murmuring quietly, "you were having a nightmare, Nance. You're okay. It was just a dream."

Even in the darkness he could see the tiny wrinkle between her eyebrows that she always got when she was confused as she glanced from him to Jonathan and back again.

"R-Right," she nodded shakily, visibly trying to collect herself.

She had yet to let either of them go.

Sensing she needed it, Steve slowly lowered himself down onto the bed, tucking his hand inside hers. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Jonathan shuffle awkwardly before he copied his movements and sat on the very edge of the bed, fingers entwining with hers. Nancy breathed a sigh, her head tipped downwards as she stared at each of the hands in hers, marveling at the differences between them, one long and slender, the other short and broad, but both strong yet gentle.

It was that gentleness that spurred her to speak.

"She was drowning. Being dragged down into the dark."

Dead silence met her words.

Steve's brain scrambled for something to say, anything, but Nancy was ploughing forward, rambling almost to herself.

"I couldn't save her. No matter what I did. I—I tried everything and it still wasn't enough. Just like real life. Just like—" she broke off, breath hitching in her throat as a shiver ran through her and into the hands she held so tight.

Jonathan dipped his head, meeting her gaze.

"It wasn't your fault, Nancy."

She let out a humourless laugh that made Steve wince.

"Yes it was—it was," she emphasised, cutting across their rising protests, "she wouldn't have been there that night if I hadn't dragged

her along. And if I hadn't...left her alone."

Bile clawed up Steve's throat.

"Then it's actually my fault," he ground out, voice raw, eyes lowered even though it would be hard to make them out in the dimness anyway, "it was my party, Nance. I-I pushed you in the pool and asked you upstairs and..." he trailed off, blood rushing to his cheeks, acutely aware that Jonathan was barely a foot away as he forced himself to finish, "kept you distracted."

Nancy's grip on him tightened minutely at that.

He knew what that meant even if she didn't.

No matter what she said, some part of her would always blame him.

"No Steve—"

"It's neither of your faults," Jonathan cut across her, "it's Hawkins Lab and that monster's. They are to blame for what happened to Barb and Will and I'll be damned if I let either of you say otherwise."

His tone was steel and ice. But Steve could see he squeezed Nancy's hand gently as he threw him a look so sincere it made a million goosebumps burst out onto his skin.

"And we're gonna make them pay."

It wasn't a threat. It was a promise.

Warmth pooled in Steve's stomach.

"Hell yeah we are."

Both boys turned back to Nancy, who looked at each of them in turn, her eyes barely visible but her body much more relaxed. A yawn wracked through her then and Jonathan made to stand up, words muttered into the dark:

"You should try get some—"

"Stay."

Jonathan stilled.

Steve stared.

Nancy pulled.

Byers shifted forward, a little closer than before. Close enough for Steve to feel his breath on the side of his cheek. He shuffled at the sensation which prompted Nancy to squeeze his hand.

"Stay. Both of you. Please?"

There was something in her voice, something quiet and vulnerable but at the same time...

Compelling.

It wasn't that he couldn't say no. It was that he didn't want to. He had a feeling Jonathan felt the same way.

Both boys seemed to silently agree to let her take the lead, she pulling Steve onto the left side of the bed and Jonathan onto the right before settling herself in between them, her back pressed up against Steve's chest as her face brushed against Jonathan's shoulder blades. Steve was fairly certain they could hear his heart banging against his ribcage.

Trying to steady his breathing, he took in deep breaths and let them out as quietly as he could. He was in bed with Nancy Wheeler and Jonathan Byers. The three of them were pressed tightly together, their heat and breath and scent intermingled. He was more than certain he and sleep were on a break for tonight.

"Night Jonathan, 'night Steve," Nancy mumbled, sounding a lot calmer.

"Night Nancy," they replied in unison.

Something surged in Steve's chest. They would make the weirdest Waltons ever.

He must have fallen asleep on the sun. It was the only explanation why it was so damn bright and so *goddamn* hot.

"Ugh, someone turn off the lights," Steve groaned, scrunching up his nose in annoyance, throwing an arm over his face to try and shield himself as he kicked out his legs to heave off the offending blankets that had entangled his limbs. The blankets would not budge, however. And his legs appeared to have very limited room to move.

"You look like a giant, blue worm," a voice mumbled quietly from somewhere above him.

"You love it," he replied with his eyes still closed, turning his face towards Nancy.

He listened as the springs of the mattress squeaked ever so slightly when she shifted next to him on her bed. Once it sounded like she had settled, he finally dared open his eyes, just a crack, and was met with large, cerulean gaze staring down at him, her brunette tendrils spilling onto his chest from where she propped herself up on her elbow.

"Morning," he murmured, his voice a little hoarse as he forced his eyes open that millimetre wider.

"Morning," she replied brightly, sounding and looking a lot more refreshed than he was expecting.

It was then that his sleep-addled brain registered that she was now on his right side.

Wasn't she on my left last ni—

Steve's eyes bugged comically in his skull as his head whipped around painfully fast to his left, only to see the sleeping form of Jonathan Byers, curled on his side, oddly-tranquil face barely an inch from his shoulder.

"Uh...Nance?" he mumbled, his voice an octave too high, gaze frozen on the other boy, "why am I in the middle?"

He heard her chuckle over his shoulder, "that would be because being in the middle of you two was like trying to sleep in an oven. So, I swapped places with you during the night."

"Huh."

He knew he was still staring at him. He knew he should look away, turn back around to Nancy and try to ignore Jonathan Byers' very existence.

Steve Harrington really did know a lot of things. He just didn't always do anything about them.

He stared some more.

"He looks so peaceful when he's asleep," Nancy murmured, her tone a little wistful, her fingers dancing across Steve's bare shoulder blades, "it's nice. Right?"

Steve damn near choked on his own spit.

"W-What? Nance why would I—" he began to turn, gaze finally dragging away from the sleeping form beside him only to have her hands rest on top of his shoulders, holding him in place.

"Is this how he looks..." she murmured into his neck, her voice dropped to barely a whisper, her tone telling him precisely nothing, "when you dream about him?"

Steve's heart leapt in his chest as he whipped back around to Jonathan, convinced that he had awoken and heard every word. But still, he slept. Forehead smooth and relaxed, no sign of his patented frown in sight.

"Nancy..." he scowled warningly under his breath, "I really don't think this is the time to talk about—"

"WAKE UP LOSERS! WE WANT BREAKFAST!"

Steve nearly jumped out of his skin as a loud thump reverberated through the bedroom door, the booming voice of Mike Wheeler wafting into the room.

"YOU KNOW WHERE THE KITCHEN IS! MAKE YOUR OWN DAMN BREAKFAST!" Nancy yelled back, making Steve wince and Jonathan bolt upright, their shoulders smacking painfully together.

"Wha—?" Jonathan blinked, his eyes widening a fraction as he saw that it was Steve who lay next to him, throwing him a sheepish grin, drinking in his decidedly not-adorable, sleep-swept hair, sticking up in every direction imaginable.

Bunching the sheets up in his fists and catching Nancy's eye, Byers grumbled, "at least your brother knocks."

Steve felt like he was missing some sort of inside joke as his bedfellows shared an enigmatic grin across him. He didn't dwell on it long though, too distracted by the fact that everyone was now wide awake after spending the night sleeping in the same bed, inches from each other.

Shouldn't he feel weirder about this? He should definitely feel *something* about this. Other than...

That feeling that had hatched in his chest and spawned a million other feelings that he resolutely was *not* thinking about.

"He's a little shit," Nancy was replying next to him to something that Steve also missed, "but it's his birthday, so we kinda have to put up with it for now."

Nobody acknowledged the elephant in the room. The Eleven-sized hole that had carved itself into Mike, hollowing him out and hardening his eyes. That was the real reason why they put up with his little-shittiness this weekend. It was a nice reprieve from his usual distance, marred with a touch of sullenness and a shimmering of sadness. These last few hours had seen a re-emergence of the usual pre-teen-turned-actual-teen antics and nobody wanted to jinx that. Not Nancy, not Jonathan, and certainly not Steve. He knew that Will, the youngest of the group, had aged the most since that fateful, life-changing week and feared (as he suspected they all did) that any tip in the precarious balance that had become their lives post-incident, would cause it all to crash down on their heads – Mike and Will falling victim first.

"When are we going to the movies?" Jonathan asked, his breath lingering on the nape of Steve's neck.

Steve fought a shiver as Nancy turned to regard them both, "around two-thirty? Mom and Dad get back at seven and want to have a family supper so..."

With that, she hopped out of the bed, running her hands through her hair and turning on the spot. Heat flooded Steve's cheeks as he watched her stare between him and Jonathan as they sat up in her bed, shoulders barely an inch from each other.

"I'm gonna go make those idiots pancakes. You guys can...*stay here* if you like."

Before either of them could respond, Nancy smiled and shook her head, making her way towards her bedroom door, throwing it open, stepping out into the hallway and closing with a snap. A dead silence rang out in the room. Steve barely dared to breathe as he tried to wait-out Byers.

One second. Two. Three.

Fuck it. He had to say some—

"Your morning breath is terrible."

Eyebrows shooting up his forehead, Steve turned his head and met Jonathan's gaze, it as usual, giving away nothing.

"Fuck you, Byers. Yours hardly smells like roses."

And just like that, the ice was broken. Jonathan shifted slightly in the bed, letting out a dry laugh as he reached up to try and pat down his hair. Steve's fingers itched to follow so instead he focussed on his own mop, knowing from experience that it more than likely looked like he had been recently electrocuted. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched as Byers ran his palms down his crumpled T-shirt, stifling a yawn and clearing his throat. Before he could even think about it, Steve reached over to Nancy's bedside table and snatched up the glass of water that lay there, turning back around and shoving it into Jonathan's hands.

Byers quirked an eyebrow at him, muttering "thanks," before raising the glass to his lips.

Steve forced himself to look away, focusing instead on the strip of mattress that lay between their thighs. Their bare thighs. They were sitting next to each other in their boxers in Nancy Wheeler's bed of all places. And oh yeah, Steve was shirtless too. He knew logically that it wasn't the weirdest thing to have gone down in Hawkins lately, but it was a close call.

And yet...it didn't feel like it was.

"Did Nancy say anything about last night?"

Steve was pulled from his reverie by Byers' quiet tone, lips still pressed lightly against the glass.

He shook his head, "nope. She seems to have slept a little better after we uh...joined her, though."

Jonathan nodded, his face pensive as he placed the now empty glass on the bedside table closest to him.

"How'd you end up next to me?"

This query was directed somewhere around Steve's feet that were still slightly covered by a deep blue blanket. He followed suit, staring where Jonathan stared, willing his heartrate to slow the fuck down.

"Apparently sleeping between us is like being in an oven. So, Nancy swapped places with me during the night."

Byers seemingly had no response to that, merely giving a half-shrug and shoving the blankets off himself, slowly standing up. Steve absolutely did not let his eyes linger over Jonathan's muscles expanding as he stood. He doubly did not notice that his boxers were a dark navy and clung tightly to his—

"YOU GUYS BETTER HURRY UP AND GET DOWN HERE BEFORE THESE LOSERS EAT ALL THE PANCAKES!"

Steve let out a sigh of relief at the distraction and bolted out of the

bed, gathering up his clothes and ignoring every move that Jonathan Byers made.

It was going to be one hell of a long day...

It always fascinated Steve, an only child with a father who was almost never home and a mother who may as well not have been, just how unbelievably loud it could get at the Wheeler household.

"What is it we're going to see?" he had to yell over several voices at Nancy as he reached up past her for a plate.

Nancy was nonchalantly flipping a pancake as if there was not the making of World War III happening at her kitchen table, Mike and Lucas on one side, Dustin and Will on the other with Jonathan standing in the middle, silently watching the argument back and forth like a raucous tennis match.

"I don't know," she shrugged, throwing him a glance over her shoulder, "something called That Is Spinal Fluid."

"*This Is Spinal Tap*," Jonathan amended, an amused grin that reached his eyes playing about his lips as he walked over to them, plate outstretched.

"Hey!" Steve smacked his arm away with the spatula, "no seconds before I have my first."

There was a beat where Byers stared at him before he suddenly jerked forward, snatching the spatula out of Steve's hand and wielding it like a sword, slapping him deftly on the side. Steve's squawk of indignation drew the younger boys from their argument, four heads turning in their direction, watching them silently.

A slow grin passed over his face as he murmured, "oh that's it, you've done it now, Byers."

Stealing up the whisk from the counter behind him, Steve held it out in front of him like he'd seen knights do in those dumb movies his mom made him watch, raising an eyebrow at Byers, daring him to make the next move.

"You two are idiots," he heard his girlfriend sigh behind him, her tone tinged with the slightest hint of amusement.

"En garde!"

Jonathan's dark eyes widened a fraction as Steve struck out at him.

Almost as if on autopilot, he expertly blocked the attack and managed to jab the taller boy again in the side with his stolen spatula. Steve let out another (definitely embarrassing) squawk and rushed forward, trying to corner Byers and marginally succeeding, his height the advantage that he would never admit to on pain of death.

Jonathan was not taking the attack lying down, however, if the sweep of his leg to Steve's feet was any indication. And just like that – Steve's world tipped on its axis, he stumbling to the floor with a loud thump.

A chorus of pre-teen voices jeered loudly at his swift defeat.

It was the little laugh that bubbled from Jonathan's throat that caught Steve's attention, however. It wasn't mocking, or snide, but light and warm. It was unlike anything he had heard from the shorter boy before and he found that he really liked it.

Liked that he caused it.

Even if it meant falling on his ass in front of six other people.

Jesus, Harrington...

A hand swooped down in front of his face. He glanced up at Byers who tilted his head at him, before grasping the palm and allowing himself to be pulled up off the floor. Either underestimating his own strength, or overestimating Steve's ability to not trip over air, Jonathan pulled the taller boy up that little bit too hard, causing him to crash into his chest, and to stumble back into the kitchen wall with a loud thump.

Steve heard the wind being knocked from Jonathan's lungs, but before he could apologise for the unfortunate placing of his elbow, carob eyes rose to meet his, robbing his own lungs of oxygen. They

had never been this close before, not in broad daylight and not upright. It was here that Steve realised that Jonathan had a small smattering of freckles that climbed up his neck. He also didn't fail to notice that Jonathan still held his hand in his and it was currently resting on the shorter boy's chest. His chest that housed a heart that was definitely beating a little faster than normal...

The air was electric, something charged between them so that it felt laborious to breathe. Suddenly, Steve was very aware of the five separate pairs of eyes staring at the two of them.

Forcing a cough, he took a step back, his hand falling from Jonathan's.

"I call foul, Byers. No fancy foot-work allowed in duels."

That caused an uproar of disagreements to erupt from the kitchen table, the four younger boys clearly in dispute over the legitimacy of Jonathan's manoeuvre. This gave Steve the moment he needed to recover from whatever the hell that was. Jonathan merely shrugged, turning away from him, walking back over to the kitchen table and depositing the spatula, gaze lowered.

Eyes glued to the other boy's back, Steve felt Nancy come up behind him, tapping gently on his elbow.

Turning, his hands were soon filled with a pancake-laden plate, just as his eyes were treated to an all-knowing look from a mind far wiser than he.

"I think you and I should talk later," she whispered, clearly amused but her gaze steady, "properly."

With that, she brushed past him, seating herself between the horde of boys, an enigmatic grin on her face.

Oh...you're in for it now, Stevie Boy.

"So...it was like a documentary?"

"Kinda, not really. Spinal Tap aren't a real band."

"Why would people make a documentary about a fake band?"

"People made an entire TV show about a fake band. Remember The Monkees?"

"Yeah but—"

Steve tuned out of Jonathan, Lucas and Dustin's conversation as they walked out of the movie theatre and towards the diner, hunching his shoulders against the breeze as he caught up to Nancy, Mike and Will.

"That trailer for *Gremlins* looked good."

The Wheeler siblings hummed in agreement as they all filed into a booth, picking up and eagerly scanning menus.

"I don't know," Nancy murmured absentmindedly as she trawled through the list of food, "I think I've had enough of monsters to last me a life time. Even if they are cute."

The table was plunged into silence at her words. Steve watched as she looked up in confusion to meet the many stares directed her way, before her words dawned on her, her eyes widening.

"I—what I mean—"

"I don't know, Gizmo's pretty cool. I think I'd make an exception," Will piped up from behind his menu, his eyes still scanning it, he the only one that hadn't been affected by Nancy's remark.

Steve caught Jonathan's eye from across the table.

He never looked more proud of his little brother than he did at that very second.

The rest of dinner went off without a hitch. There was laughing and shouting and birthday-bashing aplenty. Just when Steve thought Mike was going to burst from all the attention, Gina, the waitress, brought out a chocolate brownie with a solitary candle in it, starting up a rather nasally rendition of Happy Birthday.

"Happy Birthday, Dear Michael..."

It was just as they were reaching the final line that Steve happened to look up, his attention caught by new customers entering the diner.

His stomach plummeted.

There stood Tommy H and Carol, surrounded by a throng of other kids from Hawkins High.

Out of the corner of his eye, Steve saw Jonathan still, no doubt having spotted them too. But to his credit, the photographer merely refocused on Mike and continued singing, clapping along with everyone else as he blew out the candle. Steve on the other hand, couldn't drag his gaze away from them, watching intently as they took a booth far at the back, but still in plain sight.

At the cheering, Tommy H glanced over, his whole expression morphing from one of mirth to one of ice when he saw them. For several seconds the two ex-best friends stared at one another before Carol (who had yet to notice them) tapped Tommy's arm and pulled him into a conversation.

A hand fell on Steve's arm.

Startled, he glanced up to see Byers tilting his head at him, muttering gently, "just ignore him, man."

But Steve couldn't. For the next thirty minutes, as everyone finished off their desserts, he was more and more attuned to Tommy's presence, waiting for the other shoe to drop. He knew Nancy had noticed them sometime after the singing but, like Jonathan, was paying them no heed. When it came to paying the bill, Steve leapt up from the table as the kids put on their coats and murmured into Nancy's ear:

"You take my car. Bring Lucas and Dustin home. Me and Jonathan will take Will."

He could see the question in her eyes. The worry marring her forehead.

"Nance, seriously, it's fine. I'll come get the car back off you tomorrow. You get the boys home and go meet your parents." With that, he leaned forward and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek, before turning to Jonathan, who he knew had heard the entire conversation.

"Ready, Byers?"

The shorter boy quirked an eyebrow.

"When you are."

It was kind of a long walk from the diner to Casa Byers. Steve felt bad for making Will trek all this way, but it was a precaution he had to make. He knew that Tommy H didn't have the balls to follow Nancy to the Wheelers' place, especially if he thought her parents were home, but he did know that he wouldn't hesitate in following Jonathan and Will – despite his reluctance to go near their house.

So, there was no way he was letting them walk home alone, especially after Jonathan insulting Tommy mere days before. Which was why he found himself having a very serious conversation with the youngest Byers about which Inspector Gadget 'gadget' was better at seven o'clock on a Saturday night.

"The coat, of course it's the coat—"

"Yeah, but what about—"

"Nah, kid. I know what I'm about. The coat's it for me. What do you think, Byers?"

Jonathan chuckled, throwing an amused glance between them, "I think we're home."

Huh.

Steve hadn't realised that they had come to the house, too invested in arguing his case.

Will grinned, giving Steve a little jab in the elbow, "later, Harrington."

Thanks for walking us home."

"No problem, Lil Byers."

If he minded the nickname, Will didn't let on. Smiling softly, he shared a glance with his brother before turning on his heel and walking down the driveway and into the house.

"So..." Jonathan breathed into the night air, hands in his pockets, scuffing his shoe on the ground, "does that make me Big Byers?"

Steve snorted, "well, we do like alliteration here in Hawkins, so..."

He trailed off, catching Jonathan's eye. There was a small smile on his face, one he didn't quite have a name for, but shone in the twilight.

Suddenly, words bubbled up Steve's throat.

"Hey, Jonathan. I just want you to know—"

The smile vanished from Byers' face, it falling into a twisted frown and hardened gaze as he leapt forward and tugged him harshly.

"Steve watch out!"

A heavy pressure struck the back of his skull, a burst of pain exploding behind his eyes.

Angry shouting wafted like a dense fog to his ears as he sunk to the ground, ink blots dotting on the edge of his vision.

Jonathan Byers' stricken face as he was advanced on by two large figures was the last thing Steve saw before...darkness.

Thanks so much for everyone's continued support, it means the world to me! Oh! And those of you worried about the lack of Nancy...worry not! She will be *plenty* involved in the next two chapters ;)

NEXT CHAPTER TEASER:

Fuck it. You've come this far. May as well finish what you started.

With a deep breath, he finally caught the shorter boy's gaze.

"That's why I wanted to be your friend. Why I've *always* wanted to be your friend."

Jonathan looked at him like he had grown several extra heads. In fact, his expression would have been funny (as it so looked alien on Byers' usually stoic face) in any other situation. But as it was, Steve wanted the ground to swallow him whole.

"What do you mean by always?"

5. Chapter Five: The Acclamation

Have Happened

By Cortexikid

Chapter Five: The Acclamation

Hi guys. Sorry the update is late but, I'M FINALLY FINISHED GRAD SCHOOL! AHHHHHHHHH! I still have a tonne of work to do, including a 20,000 word thesis – so yeah. Totally not freaking out or anything. :/ anyway, here's the update. Enjoy while I ignore my existential crisis! :D

It's always tease, tease, tease, you're happy when I'm on my knees...

Pain.

A sharp dart to his forehead and a dull throb to the base of his skull.

Well come on and let me know, should I stay or should I go?

A stinging across his chest, coupled with whatever was going on with his head, had Steve sucking in a harsh breath and propelling his eyes open despite his express desire to keep them firmly closed.

"Christ on a bike, my head."

"Oh shit—you're awake!"

The gruff tones of Joe Strummer lowered significantly as a brunet blur swam in front of Steve's heavy-lidded gaze. Jonathan Byers was kneeled at his side, dark eyes widened as he muttered rapidly, "I thought I'd have to call an ambulance, man. That bastard hit you pretty hard."

Steve blinked sluggishly, utterly aware of every minute movement he made. Wincing, he shifted a little, slowly realising that he was semi-horizontal, propped up in a near-seated position by a mountain of pillows. A bed. He was in bed. A quick glance around confirmed it. Dishevelled sheets, scraps of paper, camera equipment and an

abundance of records littered every conceivable surface he could see. Yep. He was in Jonathan Byers' room.

In Jonathan Byers' *bed*.

Huh. This wasn't exactly what he had imagined...not that he had imagined being in Jonathan Byers' bed. Ever.

"You all right, dude?"

Steve's gaze snapped to the other boy, their eyes locking for a split second before he forced his away to stare anywhere else. Which just so happened to be Jonathan's chest. Jonathan's T-shirt-clad chest that had little blots marring it. Little dots of crimson.

"Are *you* all right?" he asked in lieu of answering, gesturing to Byers' shirt.

Byers glanced down quickly only to shrug, "oh, that's not *my* blood."

Steve did not want to ask. He really didn't.

"It's Tommy's."

Oh good. Byers was a mind-reader now.

That will not end well for you, Harrington.

He knew it was impossible, of course. The ability to read minds. But lately, the impossible was becoming ever more probable. No matter how far-fetched. Or ridiculous. Or terrifying.

Something sparked in his veins at that thought. Suppressing a smirk, he asked lightly, not looking at Jonathan: "who's Tommy?"

A crease formed between Byers' eyebrows. Steve bit his bottom lip.

"Uh...Tommy H?" the former replied, his dark eyes boring a hole into the latter's face, searching it.

Steve nodded, humming, picking at a loose thread on the comforter.

"Oh. And uh...who are you?"

Nothing short of sheer panic shot across Jonathan's face, his entire body tensing.

"Oh shit...dude we gotta get you to—"

Steve's face felt like it was going to burst from trying so hard not to laugh.

"Oh, fuck you, Harrington."

The panic leaked from Jonathan's face, slowly being replenished by a concoction of relief and irritation. Steve let out a short, loud snort before wincing again, fingers shooting up to gingerly press against the lime-sized lump on the back of his head.

"He sucker-punched me?"

Jonathan nodded, "he hit you with a rock. Knocked you the fuck out. I think you're lucky you're not dead."

Steve groaned as the back of his head rubbed against the pillows, a wave of nausea washing over him. Jonathan produced a bucket from thin air like some kind of wizard, unceremoniously shoving it at him. Steve hunched over it, retching a couple of times but not vomiting. After a few seconds, he took several deep breaths and carefully eased himself back down onto the pillows. He could feel Jonathan's impenetrable gaze boring into him the entire time but didn't have the energy to comment on it.

"Dude, I really think we need to get you to a hospital."

Icy cold dread shot through his veins at the thought. Steven J. Harrington did not do hospitals.

"Nah man, I'm good, really. I just...just need to sit for a bit."

He heaved another breath, forcing his eyes back open to stare down the other boy from where he sat on the floor by the bed, trying to take in his injuries. The blood on Byers' shirt may very well have been Tommy's, most likely from the punch to the face Jonathan no doubt gave him, but that did not mean Tommy didn't get him back. From what Steve could see in his admittedly hazy state, Byers had a

pretty nasty looking bruise beginning to form under his left eye as well as some sort of gash peeking out from the top of his T-shirt collar.

"Jesus, did that asshole cut you?!"

His voice was far too high, bordering on panicked, but he pushed through the embarrassment to focus on Jonathan, who was now resolutely not looking at him, staring down at his scraped and bruised knuckles instead.

"It's just a scratch. He had a switchblade."

Steve knew he was gaping, but he couldn't force his mouth closed.

"Shit. That psychotic motherfucker! How—how did we get away? How did you...get me in here?"

Byers cleared his throat, his gaze slowly rising from his hands to stare up at Steve, "a car started coming up the street. Guess it spooked them."

Steve didn't fail to notice that he had conveniently dodged the second part of his question. Nope, that just wouldn't do at all.

"And uh...how did you get me in here?"

Oh, he was definitely not imagining the flush that was rising in Jonathan's cheeks.

"I uh..." another clearing of his throat, eyes averted again, "I...carried you."

He should have seen that coming, really. It was like Byers said, Steve was knocked the fuck out, how else would he have gotten him inside? Still, the warmth that pooled in his stomach at that was surprising nonetheless. He desperately tried to suppress the sudden vision of him slack in Jonathan's arms as he was carried bridal-style across a threshold. He winced.

That's too much, man. Jesus. Must be the head injury. Quick, say something!

"Oh."

Wonderful. Say something else, asshole!

A beat.

Two.

"Thanks, Byers. I uh...I owe you."

Jonathan just shrugged but looked like he immediately regretted the action, if his grimace was anything to go by. Steve's eyebrows shot up, noticing that a darker, less faint blot of crimson was seeping through his shirt.

"Dude, you're bleeding. Bad."

He went to sit up, to help him, but his head felt like it had temporarily vacated his body and instead floated like a helium balloon, high up above them. It felt nice. Like he fell asleep on a cloud...

"Whoa!"

Warm hands clasped his shoulders before he could tumble out of the bed.

"Easy, easy," hot breath murmured against his ear as he was gently tipped back onto the pillows, "I got ya..."

Oh, you really got me goin'...you got me so I dunno what I'm doin'...

"I didn't know you liked The Kinks."

Oh shit.

"Did I sing that out loud?" Steve asked, cringing at his mind's inability to filter his mouth.

"You've a shit voice," Byers remarked drily as he settled himself back down on the floor, catching his eye, "I'd say don't give up your day job, but spoiled brats like you don't have one."

"Fuck you, Byers. I'll have you know I *did* have a summer job—"

"For like a week until you decided you'd rather eat the inventory than sell it."

"It was an Ice-Cream Parlour, Byers. I'm only human!"

The two boys let out a soft chuckle at Steve's indignant squawk before his attention was again caught by the dark red stain that was steadily growing across his shirt.

"Seriously, man. I think you're the one that needs the hospital."

Jonathan glanced down at himself, his eyes flickering as he had some sort of inward battle. Before Steve could open his mouth in question, it dropped open in surprise as Byers' hand clasped the material at the back of his neck and deftly pulled the shirt up and off his head.

One blink. Two. Three.

"Take a picture, Harrington. It'll last longer."

Steve's eyes snapped up from where they had apparently been staring openly at Jonathan's chest.

"I thought you were the one who took pictures?" he replied lamely, a flush rising in his cheeks as carob eyes met his.

You absolute dumbass.

Byers tilted his head and stared at him as if he was suppressing the urge to roll his eyes and in that moment, he reminded Steve so much of Nancy, it was uncanny. His stomach did a funny little swoop at the thought. Steve watched as Jonathan broke eye-contact, looking down at himself, his nimble fingers hovering over red and irritated skin.

He was spellbound by the thin, jagged line that forced the other boy's flesh apart, his gaze gluing on the singular droplet of blood that had made its escape down the smooth, ivory valley between neck and collar bone, veering towards Jonathan's sternum. Steve's hand scrunched up the sleeve of his shirt between his fingers and before he could stop himself, he leaned down and gently pressed the material

against the droplet.

Jonathan jumped at the contact but didn't pull away. Instead, his thousand-yard stare focussed intently up at Steve who had to force himself to glower at his own hand as his mind screamed at him to *sit the fuck back right now Harrington, for the love of—*

"Does it...does it hurt?"

Words tumbled from his lips before he could shove them down.

"A little."

Those eyes were still on him. He could feel them drinking him in. No doubt searching his face for any sign of what could possibly be running through Steve's head right now.

Good luck with that, Byers. 'Cause I have no fucking clue.

Well, that wasn't entirely true. He did know what one of the many spiralling thoughts were.

He just didn't want to acknowledge it.

Naming something gives it power.

Who said that? Lennon?

McCartney?

Definitely not Ringo.

"You still with me, Harrington?" Jonathan's voice broke through his reverie.

Steve snapped his eyes up from where his fist lay rested against the pale stretch of skin.

"Yeah, I—I'm still with you, Byers."

He tried to say it flippantly, weightless words that could float up to the ceiling where Steve's balloon-like consciousness had fucked off to. But, no. Instead they sunk like lead into his chest. They rang in his

ears like a struck cymbal.

"Good."

He felt rather than saw Jonathan nod. Steve's fist shifted minutely under the movement but not enough to dislodge his touch. In a gesture far too gentle to be anything but deliberate, Byers leaned ever so slightly back, his hand coming up to hover over Steve's, his fingers an inch from Steve's grazed knuckles.

"I think the bleeding has stopped."

He knew that. He did. He also knew that had he not succumbed to a head injury less than an hour ago, he may have caught the other boy's drift quicker and took his hand away. But as it was, Steve had a bump the size of a clementine on the back of his skull and hell, if he was honest, even when his noggin wasn't sporting any extra lumps, he could be a bit of an idiot.

So, his hand stayed where it was.

Which spurred Jonathan into action.

Steve watched, entranced, as Byers' fingers crossed the inch of distance between them, enclosing around his fist and gently raising it off chest.

Jonathan Byers was holding his hand.

Steve Harrington was holding his breath.

"You okay, man?"

Chocolate eyes met carob.

Steve cleared his throat, "uh...yeah—yeah man, I'm fine. Just uh—think I'm a little...fuzzy."

Fuzzy. Really? That the hill you wanna die on?

"I—I mean, you know," he gestured at his head with the hand not currently being held.

A deep crevice, like a mini caterpillar—and yep, he was definitely, 100% not thinking clearly right now—formed between Jonathan's eyebrows as his gaze raked over Steve, rising on his knees a little to glance at the back of his head.

Steve unstuck his tongue from the roof of his mouth, spluttering, "I'm fine, dude, I swear. Really. Ask me questions if you don't believe me, you know, like they do on General Hospital."

Jonathan fixed him with a look that suggested he may be about to tease the hell outta him for watching a hospital soap opera before shrugging.

"President?"

"Reagan."

"Year?"

"1984."

"Song?"

Steve frowned, letting the low music flow through his ear drums for a moment.

Come on baby, let's get together. I'll love you baby, I'll love you forever. I'm trying hard, to stay away...

"Need Your Loving Tonight."

He knew as the words were leaving his lips that they were a mistake.

But it was a question that needed an answer. Even if it sounded more like a confession.

His cheeks were on fire as Jonathan huffed, clearly suppressing a laugh.

"Thought I had you there."

Jesus Christ.

"I know my British rock bands, Byers," was what Steve intended to say.

Instead, what his treacherous mouth actually said was, "you wish, mi amigo."

A beat hung between them, Freddie Mercury's dulcet tones a fitting backdrop to Steve's internal meltdown. Slowly, Jonathan raised further onto his knees, their gazes level, his jaw oddly tight.

"Why did you start being nice to me?"

Steve's eyebrows shot up his forehead. Out of all the things he feared the other boy could've responded with, that wasn't it. Jonathan kept moving, shuffling closer to him, dark eyes piercing into his very soul.

"What?"

"Why did you start being my...*friend*?"

He looked as if he had accidentally said the wrong word. He looked like he actually never intended to say any words at all and regretted opening his mouth, really. Steve could relate. So, he forced himself to maintain eye-contact.

"I don't know, Byers," he shrugged, throwing up his hands, forcing himself stay put and not attempt to flee the room, "maybe I just wanted to hang out with a dude again. I mean, don't get me wrong, I love Nancy, she's awesome, but sometimes you just need some guy-time, you know?"

Jonathan snorted, rolling his eyes and reminding Steve of his girlfriend yet again, another little thrill shooting up his spine.

"Bullshit. You tell yourself what you want, Harrington, but if you really cared about that dumb masculinity crap, you'd still be friends with Tommy," the shorter boy replied evenly, staring him down, his jaw set, "yelling and punching doesn't make you a better man. Trust me, my dad tried that on me and he's still a piece of shit."

Steve's heart panged painfully in his chest as he stared at Jonathan who could not meet his gaze, looking every inch of someone who just

admitted something he never wanted any living person to ever know. Hunching his shoulders, the photographer sat back, resting on his heels and shaking his lowered head.

"Forget it. Doesn't matter. Let's just—"

"You were always so fucking interesting."

Jonathan's eyes snapped up, flashing with confusion.

"What?"

Steve didn't hear him however, staring pointedly over his shoulder, his ears thrumming with a rush of blood as he let the words flow from him, his brain scrambling to keep up.

"Even in middle school, you always had this...mysteriousness around you. Some called it weird, but I thought it was...cool. I—I always tried to—but Tommy—I could never pull off that. I didn't know how to be anything but a sheep, whatever Tommy told me to be. But you? You didn't give a shit, not even then. You still don't.

"You don't care about any of the drama, who's hooking up with who, and who got Freaky Freddie to buy them booze. But that's *all* I've cared about for years and it took you and Nancy an embarrassingly short time to show me how fucked up that is. I've—I've always wanted to be a little more like you, Byers. Care a little less about the dumb things and focus more on what actually matters. You've been doing it since you were younger than Will, but I'm only getting it now. So...that's..."

Steve trailed off, his brain finally catching up to his mouth, heat spreading across his cheeks his words echoed in his mind.

Fuck it. You've come this far. May as well finish what you started.

With a deep breath, he finally caught the shorter boy's gaze.

"That's why I wanted to be your friend. Why I've *always* wanted to be your friend."

Jonathan looked at him like he had grown several extra heads. In

fact, his expression would have been funny (looking so alien on Byers' usually stoic face) in any other situation. But as it was, Steve wanted the ground to swallow him whole.

"What do you mean by *always*?"

Yeah, any time the ground wanted to cave in and drag him down to the pits of hell, would be fan-freaking-tastic.

Biting his lip, Steve fought a wince.

"You remember that first day of Elementary School?"

Byers' silence spoke volumes.

Steve ran a hand through his hair, only to pull it back, wincing and blowing out a breath as he cast his mind back to that day, nearly twelve years ago, that he still remembered with vivid clarity.

"My mom had just dropped me off and I was...crying. Like, a lot. And the older kids were laughing at me. Which made me cry harder and I tried to run away and hide but this other kid stood in my way. Told me that it'd be okay and that I'd see my mom in a few hours. He... gave me a cookie. His only cookie, I think. And then walked away as if he hadn't just made me feel a million times better."

Steve raised his head, forcing himself to meet Jonathan's stormy gaze.

"You were a good kid, Jonathan. Better than I ever was. And I always regretted not following you that day, not talking to you and being your friend. And I...I guess I'm trying to make up for that now. If you'll let me."

Byers was silent for so long that Steve feared that he had actually suffered a stroke and could no longer hear.

"You were wearing a Sesame Street T-shirt."

Steve nearly choked on his own spit, mind reeling as Jonathan continued, his tone light.

"It had Big Bird on it, I think. I always liked that show."

It was the only acknowledgement he was going to get. They both knew that.

Suddenly, Jonathan stood so fast it made Steve's head spin even more than it already was.

"I'm gonna go check on Will. He—I don't think he heard anything but...yeah..."

With that, Byers turned on his heel and practically sprinted from the room, the door closing with a soft snap behind him. Steve glared at it, wishing it was a mirror he could use to berate himself.

"Harrington, you're a fucking idiot."

If you had told Steven J. Harrington even two months ago that he would be waking up on a Monday morning in Jonathan Byers' bed, he'd have laughed his head off. Which he kinda wish he could do right now if it would make the damn pain go away. He had woken up over five minutes ago and just...stared. Stared at the ceiling above him, the alarm clock next to the bed that read 07:22, the record player on the desk that had definitely seen better days...basically anywhere that wasn't to his left where a sleeping Byers lay, long eyelashes splayed across his pale cheeks.

"Oh good. You're not dead."

He almost jumped out of his skin as Jonathan spoke suddenly, shuffling next to him until he was resting against his head-board and staring down at Steve.

"When I came back last night and saw you asleep, I kinda thought you may have had a brain haemorrhage or something."

Steve stared blearily up at him.

"And you didn't think to wake me up?"

Jonathan gave a half-shrug, "nah, I remembered something that told me you'd be fine."

Steve raised his eyebrows in question.

"You need a brain to have a brain haemorrhage."

Steve's stomach gave a lurch at the sight of Jonathan's eyes dancing with mirth.

"Fuck you, Byers."

While their tones were light, their minds were not, Steve not letting on that he had a vague recollection of Jonathan waking him up several times during the night and pressing glasses of water into his hands. Instead he distracted himself from the warmth in his chest at that thought, and it was at that precise moment that he realised two things – one, Jonathan was still shirtless and two, so was he.

"Ugh..." he murmured, glancing down at himself. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Byers make an aborted gesture.

"Uh, yeah you—you kinda pulled that off during the night. You—must have been too hot. I—I would have slept on the couch but—"

Steve cut him off with a dismissive wave, a blush rising to his cheeks as he wondered if Jonathan was about to admit that he didn't want to leave him alone, "it's your bed, man. You should have made me sleep on the couch."

He could feel Jonathan's eyes sizing him up.

"Didn't really feel like lugging your lard ass around again. Besides, didn't think you'd want to sleep in the living room after...everything."

Steve gave a squawk of indignation, sitting up way too fast but ignoring the whirl of nausea, "my ass is perfectly normal-sized, dickhead!"

He didn't bother gracing Byers' other comment with a response.

Jonathan opened his mouth to argue but was cut off by a soft knock on his bedroom door. Steve could swear his cheeks seemed a little flushed, but he had just woken up and the lighting was shitty so what would he know? He watched silently as Byers threw back the covers,

got out of bed and padded to the door, holding it open a crack.

Whatever was on the other side, made Jonathan quickly glance over his shoulder at Steve before stepping out the door and closing it with a snap behind him. Luckily, the walls of the Byers household were apparently made of rice-paper and Steve could just about make out the two voices, one Jonathan's, the other Will's.

"Why is Steve Harrington in your room?"

Steve fought his flight response, trying to ignore just how eager he was to hear Byers' explanation.

"He is my...friend. Friends spend time in each other's rooms."

A flutter rose from Steve's stomach and into his chest. Jonathan must have taken what he said last night under advisement.

"Uh huh. And...why is he *shirtless*?"

Oh shit.

"He got hot."

"Uh huh. And why are *you* shirtless?"

Double shit.

"I...got hot."

"And stabbed."

Triple shit.

"It's just a scratch, Will. No need to worry, or tell mom, okay? You good getting breakfast? Lucas will be here soon to walk you to school."

Steve tuned out for the last few moments of the Byers brothers' conversation, his mind racing.

Lil Byers saw him. Shirtless in his big brother's bed.

Quadruple shit.

Huh. He couldn't remember the last time he got to quadruple. Must be some kind of record.

"So, uh, you take your coffee black, right?"

Steve's head snapped up, eyes bulging as he drank in the sight that stood before him. Jonathan, still shirtless, carrying a tray filled with various breakfast foods.

"Uh..." he muttered, avoiding eye-contact, "Will kinda...made us breakfast."

Steve really did love that kid.

"This is the second time in two days we've been in the same bed."

Steve coughed, almost choking on his Frosted Flakes, milk spilling down his chin. They were sitting up in Jonathan's bed, shoulder to shoulder, breakfast tray laid atop a thigh each.

"W-What?" he spluttered, his eyes stinging as he heaved another cough, a wayward flake no doubt lodged somewhere in his gullet.

Jonathan mouth twitched minutely as he repeated: "this is the second time in two days that we've been in the same bed," he paused, apparently unsure what his actual point was.

Steve had no idea what it could have been either. Honestly, he didn't want to think about it too much. More than he already had, of course.

"What must the neighbours think?"

That was precisely *not* what Steve had wanted to say.

What could have been construed as a wince flashed across Jonathan's face, he shifting a little so that their shoulders were further apart. It made Steve's stomach lurch. But before he could take back what he said, to try and make light of it, the other boy mumbled something

that had they not been sitting so close together, Steve definitely wouldn't have heard.

"What were you gonna say?"

Steve couldn't explain it, but despite the hour and the recent knock to the head, he didn't need clarification for what Jonathan meant. Still, he asked for it anyway, not really ready to answer yet.

"Before Tommy knocked me out?"

A nod.

Steve swallowed.

"What did you want me to know?"

Jonathan's voice was harder, somehow. Resigned. Almost as if whatever he was expecting was not good. Honestly, with Steve's track record, that was hardly surprising. Still, this didn't make this any easier for Steve. He couldn't help but remember his first aborted confession, the one where he almost blurted out—hell, he wasn't even sure, that night on Mr Rogers' lawn just before Nancy interrupted...

"Nance and me...we uh need you, Jonathan. I know we...I love her and she loves me, I think. But—before you started hanging out with us, before it wasn't...it didn't...everything that went down....it didn't feel real, you know? But you experienced it all too. You were with us and you saw and now..." he ran a hand through his hair, blowing out a breath, staring at the ground as he forced out, "when you're with us, even if it's just watching some lame movie or bitchin' about my taste in music, it feels—"

"It feels right."

Even without directly looking at him, Steve knew that Jonathan wasn't following. Gingerly, he tapped the side of his coffee cup, murmuring down to it instead of the boy barely six inches from him.

"Having you around, with Nancy and me, it feels...right. Like—like all this time, we—we were meant to be—friends? I dunno. Just—" he broke off, his face on fire as he stumbled through whatever the hell this was, like he was an actor improvising his own script.

Something felt off. Wrong. Missing.

He didn't have to think too hard to realise what it was.

"Nancy should be here too," he mumbled, eyes flickering from the dregs of his coffee up to the vicinity of Jonathan's chin, "we should let her know what happened."

He felt rather than saw Jonathan nod.

"She has a free period. Probably won't leave her house for another hour...I'll call her."

Steve heard her before he saw her, barely twenty minutes later, and tried to make himself look a little bit more respectable – or at least as respectable as he could look in another man's bed with dishevelled (borrowed) T-shirt, mussed hair and a bump the size of a tennis ball on the back of his head.

"I knew it, something just told me when you guys didn't call last night that—*oh, Steve.*"

She stood in the doorway of Jonathan's bedroom, hands on her hips and worry in her eyes.

Before Steve could utter a sound, she crossed the room and climbed onto the bed, her fingers delicately hovering an inch above his injury.

"That asshole," she hissed, her tone venomous, "he could've killed you! Just wait till the Chief—"

"No," Steve and Jonathan said in unison.

Steve's eyes met Jonathan's as Nancy bore a hole into the side of his face.

"What do you mean 'no?' He hit you in the back of the head, Steve. He could've—"

"The Chief has enough on his plate, we're not getting him involved," Steve cut across her gently, taking one of her hands, "we'll deal with

Tommy. By ourselves."

He watched as Nancy exchanged a glance with Jonathan.

"You with him on this?"

Jonathan nodded, his gaze shifting from Steve to Nancy and back again.

"Yeah. We do this together. No one else."

Nancy watched the two boys for a moment, a heavy beat passing between them.

"All right. Let's get up properly cleaned up then."

With that, she stepped off the bed and stormed out of the room, very much a woman on a mission.

The two boys watched her go before turning back to each other.

"Thanks man," Steve murmured quietly, catching Byers' eye.

"No problem," Jonathan replied just as quietly, "that's what friends are for, right?"

When he was a kid, Steve used to love sneaking into his parent's room in the early morning and attempting to sleep between his mom and dad. He was foiled time and time again, nearly always by his father, but, right up until he was seven years old, he made it his personal mission. To first-grade him, there was no better place than lying in between the warmth of two people he cared about most in the world.

Not much had changed.

He still felt that way, but the people had changed. When he was seven, it was his mom and dad. But now...? He didn't remember falling asleep, but he must have. After Nancy had checked him over, made up a fresh ice-pack and told him to lay back, he guessed he couldn't be blamed for the inevitable.

Still, that didn't mean he wasn't pleasantly surprised (and a lot confused) to find himself between Nancy and Jonathan for the second time in as many days. Blinking against the wisps of sunshine flowing through Byers' drapes, Steve estimated it was nearing mid-day. Biting his lip and moving his head as little as possible, he shifted on the bed, pressing his back against Nancy's chest, smiling a little at the slender arm slung around his waist.

He would never admit it on pain of death but...sometimes he liked being the little spoon. Nancy was warm and had a hell of a grip, what wasn't there to love? A blush rose to his cheeks as he skipped over the double-entendre and focussed on the sight in front of him. The sun had settled against Jonathan's sleeping face, somehow making him look even younger, more peaceful.

Steve watched as the other boy's chest rose and fell with deep and steady breaths, a sense of calm blanketing him in a way he hadn't felt in a hell of a long time.

"We still have to have that talk, you know."

The words were whispered across the back of his neck, the ghost of lips pressing against his flesh.

"No, we don't," he mumbled into his pillow, still staring at the other boy.

"Steve..."

"Nancy..."

"What are you so afraid of?"

He wanted to yell, scream at the top of his lungs—just what the hell did she *think* he was so afraid of? Where the hell did he even start?

"I think we're having two completely different conversations."

"I don't think we are."

This was insane. They were not actually discussing...whatever the hell they were discussing. It was ridiculous, stupid, and wrong.

So wrong.

More wrong than anything Steve had ever felt.

Why couldn't she understand that?

"I love you, Nance. More than anything. But whatever it is you think is going on—"

Jonathan shifted on the bed, cutting Steve off. A wince crossed his sleeping features, his T-shirt having shifted as he did, exposing the jagged wound on his chest.

"What the hell is that?" Nancy hissed, having sat up to rest on her elbow, peering over Steve's shoulder at Byers.

"Did that bastard cut Jonathan?!"

The boy in question's eyes snapped open at Nancy's distress, just in time to watch in confusion as she climbed across Steve and toward him.

"Nancy what—"

"He hurt you! You didn't tell me he hurt *you*, idiot!"

Steve watched as Nancy squeezed herself between them, fingers hovering over the jagged line much like they did over Steve's injury.

"It's just a—I'm fine, Nancy," Jonathan murmured, voice hoarse with sleep as he exchanged a wide glance with Steve over Nancy's head who merely shrugged at him unhelpfully.

"Did you disinfect the wound?"

Nancy seemed to be ignoring both of them, too busy with trying to pull Jonathan's T-shirt up over his head.

"Whoa, Nanc—"

"You didn't clean the wound properly, did you? Jesus Jonathan, if you're not careful it's gonna get infected. Take your shirt off, I'm

gonna go get supplies."

With that, she climbed over Jonathan and stormed out of the room without a backwards glance. Steve had a vague feeling of déjà vu from this morning.

"How come you didn't tell her?" he heard himself asking before realising his mouth was even opening.

Jonathan stared at him, still half-lying on the bed, legs trapped in his comforter, T-shirt still askew from Nancy's ministrations.

"You were the one with the head wound, Harrington. A little scratch —"

"A *little scratch* can become a *big deal* if left untreated, Byers," Nancy cut across him as she bolted back into the room, a wash cloth, ice cubes, a mini first-aid kit, and what looked like a bottle of vodka, in her hands.

"Honestly, I leave you two alone for five minutes," she continued to mutter under her breath as she climbed back over Jonathan and settled herself between him and Steve, a strip of band aids between her teeth as she motioned impatiently for Jonathan to take off the offending garment.

Sharing another quick look with Steve, Jonathan shook his head and pulled off his T-shirt, mussing up his hair and quickly dropping his chin to his chest, hunching in on himself. Nancy, clearly having none of that, tilted his chin up towards her and tutted as the wound was fully revealed.

"Oh, that asshole isn't gonna know what hit him," she spat, the venom in her tone downright terrifying.

"Nancy—"

"No, Jonathan!" she cut across him, as she started to dab the wound with the damp washcloth, "I'm sick of all this shit! Tommy H and all those other dickweeds have been making our lives hell the last few months and we've just been largely ignoring it. We've all been through enough already without—without..." she trailed off, heaving

a sigh as she lightly dabbed the cloth against Jonathan's skin.

Steve watched as she visibly deflated. Attentively, he reached out and clasped her shoulder, squeezing it gently as Jonathan simultaneously brushed his fingers against the back of her hand.

"Okay, Nance, this stops now. We'll make sure of it," Steve promised, catching Jonathan's gaze over the top of her head, "all three of us. Together."

Jonathan nodded, breaking eye contact with Steve to focus on Nancy, "yeah, together."

Nancy chuckled, leaning up and resting her forehead against Jonathan's. Steve saw the other boy's entire body tense before his eyes drifted shut and his arm wrapped around her back, his hand falling just inches from where Steve's still rested on her shoulder.

"I just don't want you to get hurt," she mumbled against Jonathan so lowly that Steve had to lean forward to hear her, "*either* of you. I—I don't know what I'd do if I lost—"

"You're not gonna lose us," Steve and Jonathan mumbled in unison.

"Jinx, you owe me a coke," they both continued before laughing.

Nancy joined them, shaking her head as she tilted back from Jonathan, looking over her shoulder at Steve, an indecipherable expression on her face as she searched his eyes for...something.

Before Steve could figure it out, she reached up and clasped his hand, squeezing it and turned back to Jonathan, taking a deep breath, and leaning forward, pressing her lips against his.

**So...yeah. That happened. The "have happened" in "Stranger Things" has happened. Whoa boy. Full steam ahead now, folks!
:D**

NEXT CHAPTER TEASER:

"What's wrong, Nance? Feelin' like a third wheel...er?"

"Oh my god, I hate you."

6. Chapter Six: The Afflatus

Have Happened

By Cortexikid

Chapter Six: The Afflatus

I did it. I finished and submitted my postgraduate thesis. 82 pages, 23,587 words. Phew! Now, time to get back to Steve Harrington's sexual identity crisis.

Warning: Very slight allusion to the AIDs crisis of the 1980s.

Nancy Wheeler was kissing Jonathan Byers.

Nancy was kissing Jonathan while Steve watched.

Nancy was kissing Jonathan while Steve watched and Steve was doing nothing to stop it.

Nancy was kissing Jonathan while Steve watched and was doing nothing to stop it as he sat in Jonathan's bed trying (and failing) to control his rapid heartbeat and the warmth that was pooling in his stomach.

Huh.

He'd lost count how many dreams he had that started exactly like this.

Wait...am I dreaming? Oh god, Tommy H knocked me out and now I'm in a coma and having a sex dream in the hospital bed probably poppin' a boner when my mom is in the room holy shi—

"Nancy, wha—" Jonathan broke away after what could only have been about three seconds but felt like a lifetime to Steve as he came to the realisation that this was actually happening.

Before either Nancy or Steve could speak a word, Jonathan leapt up off the bed, alternating between shooting shocked glances at Nancy

and weary ones at Steve, his entire body poised for a fight that he didn't know would never come.

"Jonathan just—"

"I—you—what?" He looked so lost and sounded even more so.

Nancy turned her head to Steve, her brow furrowed with worry, biting the bottom lip that had just brushed against Jonathan's.

"Steve...we should talk about this."

Panic surged in Steve's veins as kept his head lowered, unwilling to meet her eye.

"Steve."

He stared at his lap. Nancy turned to Jonathan, her hands gripping her knees where she still sat on his bed.

"I'm sorry, Jonathan I—I didn't mean to just spring this on you, I swear. I just...I thought..." she seemed at a loss for words now, looking back and forth between the two boys who both refused to meet her eye.

"But I guess I was wrong."

A jolt of pain shot through Steve's chest at those words.

Nancy began to move, shifting off the bed and standing, her back ramrod straight.

"I hope this doesn't ruin..." she threw up her hands, a sigh on her lips, "everything. But I just—I had to try, had to do something, *anything*. And I'm sorry Jonathan," she continued, taking several steps toward him and stopping barely a foot from him, trying to catch his eye, "but you...you want this, right?"

You want me, right?

They all knew that was what she was really asking.

Slowly, Byers raised his eyes to meet hers, his dark gaze shining with something Steve feared he was too far away to truly see.

"Nancy..." Jonathan whispered, his voice sounding far too small and vulnerable, laid bare in a way that Steve had never heard before.

Nancy shook her head, her fingers timidly inching towards Jonathan's hand. Slowly, they wrapped around him, squeezing gently.

"Jonathan, it's okay. I—I probably should have gone about this a different way but..." she trailed off, glancing over her shoulder at Steve who continued to stare doggedly at their interlocked hands, the warmth in his abdomen, simmering.

"I..." she turned back to Jonathan, her face, from what Steve could see, set in determination, "I want this too."

The sharp intake of breath no doubt took neither of them by surprise, but it was startling in the near-silent room all the same. Jonathan's face was doing something complicated, a myriad of different emotions crossing his features in the split second it took for Steve to blink. After a moment or two however, one emotion won out over all – anger.

"I...I don't know what *this*," he gestured between all three of them, his jaw clenched tightly, "is, but it's not funny. I—just...I gotta go."

A lump lodged in Steve's throat as another emotion took over Jonathan's face – hurt.

Shit.

"Jonathan, wait—"

The door slammed heavily as he stormed out without a backwards glance. Steve stared at the space Jonathan had just occupied. He could practically feel Nancy doing the same as he saw her drop her hand that had been outstretched. He wasn't sure exactly what it was that he was feeling—anger? Jealousy? Pain? None of those seemed to fit. A spark ignited in his gut as he mentally replayed the image of Nancy's lips on Byers'. A spark he most definitely recognised but refused to put a name to. A spark that he knew he had felt before in

his ever-present dreams, except multiplied tenfold. This feeling rose through his body to rest mainly in his face if the look Nancy was now throwing him was any indication. Time to go on the defensive.

"What the hell, Nance?!"

"Oh, don't you 'what the hell' me, Steve Harrington. You know very well."

She had him there. But there was no way he was going to let her know that. He stood up from the bed, crossing the room, arms folded as he forced himself to look her in the eye.

"And how exactly was I supposed to know you were just gonna lay one on Jonathan Byers?"

Nancy tilted her head, cerulean eyes boring a hole into him.

"Because you've been thinking about doing exactly the same thing?"

His jaw dropped as he spluttered, a half gasp, half laugh falling from his lips.

"Don't—don't be...I'm not—you're my girlfriend!"

Nancy nodded, her expression softening a little, "I am. And as your girlfriend, I feel like I can say I know you pretty well, Steve. And lately? Especially these last few months...I've seen the way you've been looking at Jonathan."

Steve was having a heart-attack. He had to be. There was no way the pounding in his chest could possibly be medically safe. And yet, he still stood, gaping at Nancy like a fish forced onto land.

"I know how you've been looking at him, Steve," Nancy continued, taking a step forward and placing his hand gently in hers, squeezing it as she stared up at him, "because I know I look at him the same way."

Well, shit.

Silence stretched between the couple, their hands still interlocked.

Steve swallowed several times, finding his throat dryer than the Sahara but needing to get the words out, to finally confirm what he had known for a while now.

"You like Jonathan."

There was no inflection, no question being asked, just a statement of fact.

"Yeah, I like Jonathan."

There was no gut punch, no sledgehammer shattering of his heart, no ice flowing through his veins. The words felt more like a balm soothing his hyper-sensitive skin, a puzzle piece finally slotting into place, an anonymous entity finally being named. The words were soft, spoken more to his hands than to his face, but Steve didn't begrudge her that.

"And you like him too."

She was looking at him again. Jaw set, her grip on his fingers tightening ever so slightly.

He fought the urge to stare at the floor, "Yeah, sure. I...he's a friend."

"You have a lot of sex dreams about your friends, Steve?"

Yep, he was definitely having a heart attack.

Steve wrenched his hand from Nancy's, turning on his heel and storming over to the bed, stumbling a little as the pounding in his head increased, forcing him to sit down heavily, cradling his head in his hands, elbows poised on his knees.

"I—I'm not a queer!" Steve winced, the words turning to bile in his throat as he directed them to the floor, "I-I mean, I...I like chicks, okay? I like you, I like girls and boobs and—"

"Jonathan's hair and hands and shoulders too," Nancy cut across with a shrug, "if your sleep-talking is anything to go by."

A heavy silence hung in the air.

One beat, two, three...

A small sigh followed by the shuffling of feet approached Steve before the bed dipped beside him. Still, he kept his eyes on his hands which were gripped tightly together, fingers interlaced. A soft pressure fell on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Steve," Nancy murmured gently, "I—I didn't mean to...I never wanted to force you to...I just want you to be happy."

A laugh, a lot less jovial and a lot more bitter fell from his lips before he could snatch it back.

"We're hardly living in happy times, Nance. None of us are."

He knew she couldn't argue with that.

"We're getting better," she reasoned instead, "and we could get there, someday. All...all three of us."

The implication hung heavily in the air. It forced Steve's eyes to unglue themselves from his fists and fix his girlfriend with a quirked eyebrow, because there was absolutely no way she was actually suggesting—

"I think we could be good together, you, me...and Jonathan."

Holy shit, she was.

"I mean," she continued hurriedly as if saying it faster would somehow make it reasonable, "we already are. We fought an interdimensional monster together, Steve. If we can get through that, I think we can do pretty much anything, right?"

Steve gaped at her.

"Nancy...you can't—are you..." he blew out a breath, not knowing where to even start.

She reached out, placing her hand over his, looking him dead in the eye.

"Wouldn't be the weirdest thing we've ever done, would it?"

He stood up so suddenly his brain barely registered he had begun to pace, running a hand through his hair, careful of the bump on the back of his head.

"Nancy it's—it's not normal, I—we can't do this. People *don't do this*."

"They *do*, *they have*. I looked it up."

That stopped him in his tracks.

"Of course you did."

Those seemed to be the magic words Nancy was waiting for because in what seemed like a half-second, she had crossed the room to her backpack, pulling out what looked like a manuscript and shoving it unceremoniously into Steve's hands.

"What are these?" he asked, keeping his eyes focused on her face, scared to even glance down at the first page.

Colour rose to Nancy's cheeks as she stammered, "They're information on...bisexuality and...unconventional romantic...dynamics."

His eyebrows shot up.

"And you've just been carrying them around in your backpack?"

She cleared her throat, palm rubbing the side of her neck, "For the last few weeks, yeah."

Steve tilted his head at her.

"What?" she exclaimed, her skin taking on a definite rosy-hue now, "I knew we'd be having this conversation eventually, so...I came prepared."

"Like a good Girl Scout," Steve deadpanned, shaking his head in exasperation, his eye catching on the title of one of the chapters – *Bisexuality In Men: Fact and Fiction*.

"Where—where did you look all this up?"

"A library."

"Right."

He still hadn't gotten past that first page even though he could feel his fingers itching to, his eyes trained on that word and only that word: *bisexuality*.

"Steve it's—" Nancy made an aborted move as if to touch him but thought better of it, "I didn't want to presume anything. Not—not without talking to you first. I'm not trying to say you're anything, or put words in your mouth. I—I just thought that if you had some information on stuff it might...might help you figure out some...things."

A weight settled in his chest.

"It is really that obvious?" he asked quietly.

Nancy was across the room before he could even blink, gripping his shoulders tightly, chin tilted up towards him, trying to catch his eye.

"Steve, listen to me. You're okay, everything is okay. What you're feel—what you *may* feel, it's...there's nothing *wrong* with you."

He let out another snort at that, despite the fluttering in his chest.

"Come on, Nancy. You've seen the news...heard what they say about—about guys who..." he swallowed the lump in his throat, horrified to feel the familiar sting behind his eyes.

Small hands clasped the sides of his face, tilting his head down until he was met with bright, cerulean eyes that shone with an intensity that took his breath away.

"You listen to me, Steve Harrington. There is nothing, *nothing* wrong with you. What you're feeling isn't wrong, no matter what any dumb news broadcast says. I—I know that it's scary and...and the world can be a shitty and terrifying place sometimes but...we've all been through scarier and shittier things already to let whatever fear-

mongering, corporate jackasses say hold us back," she paused, stroking his cheek with her thumb, "it's like you and Jonathan said. We're in this together. Whatever that means...is up to you."

They looked into each other's eyes for what felt like a lifetime. Steve would bottle the moment and keep it forever if he could, suspended on the precipice of something he knew would change the course of his life, more than monsters or alternate worlds ever could.

"We—" he mumbled, clearing his throat nervously, forcing himself to keep eye-contact as he continued softly, "we don't even know if Jonathan...likes me back."

A ghost of a smile crossed her lips as she tutted, leaning up to brush her mouth against his in a chaste kiss, her small hand slipping into his.

"Don't be stupid, Harrington."

He felt like there was something she wasn't saying. Something she knew but he didn't and she wasn't going to enlighten him any time soon.

Still, it was worth a shot.

"Know that for a fact, do you?"

Nancy looked down at their clasped hands, her voice low but firm, "why don't you ask him?"

It was a shitty day – overcast with a chill in the air, the sun engulfed in dark, dense clouds. Steve snorted, remembering something Nancy once said about his moods being like a large, black cloud that loomed over him, slumping his shoulders and souring his face. Now it was figurative and literal.

Great. Even the weather hated him.

As he pulled up at Hawkins High parking lot, he heaved a deep breath, gently resting the back of his head against the seat, his eyes falling on the photograph that Nancy had slipped into the visor a

while back. Will Byers had taken it, the night of the fireworks. It was of him, Jonathan and Nancy, sitting on a picnic blanket in the Wheelers' back yard, the latter pair's faces tipped up to the sky. But it was his own face that entranced Steve – or rather, the expression on it. He knew what it was, could recognise it from space, and yet, it made him uneasy; because picture-Steve wasn't looking at the sky. Picture-Steve was instead focussed on Nancy and Jonathan, his eyes telling a story that his mouth could not.

Nancy, as always, was right. She needed to look no further than his car to find the proof. But she didn't need to, he knew that now. Just how obvious had he been this entire time? Did anyone else know? Would they tell—

Tap, tap.

Steve jumped half a foot in the air, arms flailing and smacking against the window where Will Byers stood smiling sheepishly at him, knuckles still raised by the glass.

"H-Hey, lil Byers," he stammered as he rolled down the window, running a hand through his hair and willing his enflamed cheeks to calm the hell down.

"Hey Steve," the younger boy grinned, a glint in his gaze that told Steve he wasn't exactly buying his 'suave' act, "what'cha doing?"

"I-I...what are you doing? Shouldn't you be in school?"

He winced at his affronted tone, scolding himself for sounding like some old dude like Mr Wheeler after Mike skipped class to go to the arcade. Will didn't seem bothered however, merely jerking his head behind him where Steve saw Dustin Henderson and his mom standing by a car.

"Mrs Henderson picked us up," Will paused, tilting his head as his eyes passed over the photograph still visible in the visor.

"I thought you'd like that."

Steve followed his gaze, letting it linger probably longer than he should, "yeah—yeah I do. The Byers brothers know how to take a

good picture."

He could feel when Will's stare had shifted from the photograph to rest on the side of his face.

"Jonathan has the other one."

That caught his attention, eyes meeting the younger boy's with interest.

"The other one?"

Will shrugged, an enigmatic expression crossing his young features, "yeah, the other picture I took that night...the one of Jonathan looking at Nancy...and you."

Steve's heart shuttered like a spluttering engine as the kid just grinned, readjusting his backpack and glancing over towards the high school. A thousand silent words passed between them, both boys understanding one another in that inexplicable way that never ceased to amaze the teenager.

God, Will Byers was a good kid.

"He's inside, you know."

"I know."

"Yeah, he hates that," Will laughed, scuffing his foot against the ground.

Fear spiked in Steve's veins, a shiver flowing down his spine. He unglued his tongue from the roof of his mouth, swallowing nervously.

"Hates what?"

Will stared at him for a long moment, something indistinguishable lighting his face as a soft smile settled there.

"That you know him so well."

Strange thing was, Steve didn't realise until this exact moment how

well he truly knew Jonathan Byers by now. Staring at the hard line of the shorter boy's shoulders, it hit him just how far they had both come since that day in the alley, where their fists did more talking than their mouths ever did.

"Get lost, Harrington. You're letting the light in."

Steve took a deep breath, steeling himself for the conversation he knew had to happen. After waving off the younger Byers, his blood humming with anticipation, Will's words seeping into his skin, he made his way into the high school, halting in front of the door before forcing himself to open it, revealing a familiar silhouette. Taking a step into the dark room, he let the door close behind him with a loud snap. It took several seconds for his eyes to adjust to the eerie red glow but once they did, he could see that Jonathan wasn't working on anything. Instead, he was just standing at the trays, shuffling equipment around, trying his best to look busy.

What a dork.

The persistent fluttering in Steve's chest made another appearance.

"Thought I told you to get lost?" Byers murmured, still not turning around.

"I go to school here, Byers. It's kinda hard to get lost."

"You're hilarious."

"I try."

"Not very hard."

"Well, I've always been a bit of an under-achiever."

Byers snorted before immediately tensing, no doubt cursing Steve's rapier wit.

Steve took that opportunity to inch slowly forward, closing the distance between them.

"You ever gonna turn around, Miles Davis?"

Jonathan hummed, turning his head slightly, "I didn't know you liked jazz."

"I didn't know you liked Nancy."

He knew it was cruel, but honestly, he didn't know how else to start this. So sue him.

"Yeah you did," Jonathan spat, turning on the spot and glaring at him, "even you're not that stupid."

Steve chuckled, crossing his arms and taking another step forward, pleased not for the first time at their height difference as he stared down at him, "you're right, I'm not. Aliens could see it from space, man. I'm about as stupid as you are subtle."

Anger flashed across Jonathan's face, his jaw clenching tightly.

"So, what? You've come here to warn me off? Tell me to stop hanging with you guys? In case you forgot, Harrington, *you're* the one that started all this. *You're* the one who invited me on your dates and called me your 'friend' and—and punched Tommy H when he insulted me, knowing all this time that I lov—had a thing for your girlfriend?" Jonathan scoffed, throwing up his hands, "I didn't know what game you were playing. Couldn't figure it out, but...but I knew me and Nancy would never happen and I—I liked hanging with you guys so I...I told myself I'd get over it and—and now she..."

He trailed off, eyes bugging as his words sunk in, hanging between them.

"You know, I think that's the most I've ever heard you speak."

"Fuck you, Harrington."

The tension between them didn't break, but bent slightly.

Without thinking about it, Steve reached for Jonathan's shoulder, only to have him smack it away roughly and stumble back into the wall, entire body poised for a fight.

"Byers just—"

"What ya gonna do?" Jonathan asked, glaring up at him, his dark gaze glinting, "hit me a—"

Steve surged forward, pressing his lips against his. Jonathan's entire body tensed as Steve's hand gripped his shoulder, punching the material between his fingers. It couldn't have been more than two seconds, but Steve felt like he had kissed a livewire, a tingling in his veins flowing from head to toe, before he abruptly sprang back and held up his hands in what he hoped was an appeasing way.

That was *not* what he intended to do.

Right?

"Shit, fuck, Byers I—"

Jonathan held up a hand and Steve's words died in his throat. The other hand slowly raised to his lips cut across him, as if to run his fingers across them, his voice croaked in shock, "what the hell is with you two?"

"We like you, asshole."

The two boys whirled around only to be met by the sight Nancy Wheeler leaning against the now slightly ajar door, looking equal parts exasperated and fond.

Steve glanced from Jonathan, to Nancy, and back again.

"Uh...what she said?"

Okay. So. Obviously, I'm not ready to say goodbye to this yet. My bad. I know this chapter is short AF, but that's because the next one is a monster and (may, possibly, more than likely) be the last. I know I said this one would be the last, but I also intended this to be a one-shot so clearly, I'm a damn, dirty liar and shouldn't be trusted.

Fun Fact: I really, really, *really* did not want to end on this cliff hanger. In fact, there were several more paragraphs after this but, I'm gonna be real with ya, folks. My grad thesis has given me a writing hang-over and this is all I can manage. So, yeah.

This sat on my hard-drive for weeks, but I'm posting it now and hoping for the best. Annnnd I'll stop over-sharing now!

NEXT CHAPTER TEASER:

He knew it was possible to fuck more than one person at the same time. Hell, his dad's extensive collection of Betamax tapes proved that. But love?

Impossible, meet probable.

7. Chapter Seven: The Acceptance

Have Happened

By Cortexikid

Chapter Seven: The Acceptance

Warning: Under-age drinking ahead.

Well, here it is. The actual last chapter, after all my talk about ending this several chapters and many thousand words ago haha. One last big thanks to pantlesshero for prompting me to write this in the first place and thank you so much to everyone else for also sticking by me this last year. I hope you all enjoy it and it was worth the wait. Roll on season 2! :D

"You like me."

The words were flat, not a question, not a statement, but something else in between. Steve was at a loss, looking between the two people he cared most for as they alternated between staring at him and stealing glances at each other.

"Your shirt's inside out."

Silence rang in the air as Steve shut his jaw with a snap, cursing his brain-to-mouth filter for what felt like the millionth time in the last two days. Seemed as if he was on full panic-mode, blurting out the first thing that came to mind so that they would not have to possibly talk about the biggest mistake he had ever made in the history of his life.

"Yeah well," Jonathan shrugged, wholly unaware of Steve's inner-freak-out, looking down at said shirt, "I kinda left in a hurry. Just grabbed whatever on the way out."

Steve nodded, shoving his hands in his pockets, and aiming for nonchalant, "it's The Clash, right? I recognise the—"

"Seriously?" Nancy scoffed, stepping fully inside the room and throwing up her hands, "you guys kiss and all you can talk about is Jonathan's shirt?"

Both boys gaped at her as she put her hands on her hips and glared up at them.

"We *are* going to talk about this," she continued, firmly but quietly, "for the sake of our friendship, we have to." She turned to Steve, chin jutted out as if daring him to protest, "so, get on with it, Harrington."

He could feel the weight of two pairs of eyes on him, one waiting, the other...something else. He knew that Nancy was doing this out of love, trying to help him after the monumental fuck up that was him unceremoniously kissing on Jonathan out of nowhere, but still, he couldn't help but feel attacked.

"Hey, you kissed him first, Nance. *You* get on with it."

Nancy, clearly exasperated, rolled her eyes, "Jonathan already knows how I feel about him, Steve."

A beat of stillness followed her words.

"Do I?"

The couple whirled around to where Jonathan stood staring wide-eyed at them, his quiet question permeating about his lips as if holding back a whole host of other queries that wanted to burst from them.

Nancy's expression softened as she nervously wrung her hands, "uh, yeah, I...didn't think I was exactly subtle."

Steve suppressed the urge to snort, "neither of you are."

Jonathan's eyes snapped to him, jaw tight, "that's rich coming from you."

Irritation spiked in his veins, "what's that supposed to mean, Byers?"

"Well, you did just kiss him, Steve," Nancy piped up oh-so-helpfully.

That plunged them back into an awkward silence that was cut short by the sound of the school bell ringing, reminding Steve that they had all technically played hooky and he should be in Spanish class right now. Ms Pérez was gonna rip him a new one.

The back of his head gave a painful twinge.

"Look," Nancy sighed, holding up an appeasing hand, "we're going in circles. Why don't we get outta here to talk about this somewhere more...private?"

Steve's heart lurched in his chest at the suggestion, but he had to admit that she had a point. They had gone beyond avoidance, and much to his dismay, this couldn't be put off any longer. Not if the way Jonathan had been staring at him for the last five solid minutes had anything to say about it.

"Sure," he responded, trying and failing to sound nonchalant, "I know just the place."

Turns out it was remarkably easy to sneak in and out of Hawkins High. Like, concerningly easy. Were it not so beneficial for him, Steve may have considered notifying faculty about getting their collective shit together. Sure, it wasn't on par with interdimensional monsters roaming the halls of Hawkins Middle School, but three teens skipping class to go figure out their weird relationship dynamic? It was a slippery slope.

"Really? This is where you wanna talk?"

Steve winced as Nancy's terse tone spat him from his reverie. Slowly, he turned on the spot, glancing around the isolated woods they found themselves standing in.

"Sorry Nance, I know this place doesn't have the best memories for you but—you gotta admit, we're not gonna be disturbed here. Most people are still too freaked out."

Including me, he refrained from adding.

With neither Nancy nor Jonathan responding, Steve took that as his

cue to take off his jacket and spread it out on the ground, sitting down on it and gesturing for them to do the same. There was a half-second pause before both seemingly gave in and sat down. Directly opposite him. Their gazes staring pointedly in his direction.

Shit. He did not think this through.

Good thing he brought reinforcements.

"Is that whiskey?" Jonathan asked as Steve pulled a bottle out of his back pack and deftly taking a swig, trying not to gag, and holding it out.

"Keen observational skills as always, Byers," Steve deadpanned, sighing and rolling his eyes, "I don't know about you man, but I'm not sure I can have this conversation without some liquid courage."

Carob eyes continued to bore a hole into him as a slender hand reached out and took the bottle from his grasp. Both boys stared silently as Nancy raised the whiskey to her lips and took a more than generous gulp, wincing only slightly.

Ever full of surprises was Nancy Wheeler.

Steve watched as she faltered in passing the bottle to Jonathan, something weighted between them.

"I'll pass. Thanks."

Jonathan took it and handed it back to Steve, avoiding his eye.

If he had to guess, Steve would wager that Lonnie Byers was a whiskey man. A surge of guilt rolled in the pit of his stomach at that thought, so he hastily put the bottle back in his bag, to be returned barely touched to his father's liquor cabinet as soon as he got home.

Guess he was doing this sober.

"You kissed me."

Guess he was doing this now.

Jesus.

Steve glanced at Nancy, asking for help with his eyes. She stared doggedly back at him, remaining silent.

Alright then.

"I did."

Jonathan nodded, as if he had needed confirmation that he didn't miraculously imagine the whole thing. Slowly, he turned to Nancy, "and you kissed me."

She nodded back, "I did."

Byers stared down at his hands that lay in his lap, his voice no higher than a whisper, "why?"

Steve could hear the insecurity a mile away, see it from space, but he resolutely said nothing. Could not unstick his tongue from the roof of his mouth to begin to explain just why he liked Jonathan Byers.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Nancy's mouth drop open, but before any sound could escape, Jonathan ploughed ahead, "and don't say 'because we like you, asshole.' That—that doesn't clarify things. At all. Especially when it comes to *you*." He punctuated that last sentence with a hard look at Steve.

"A year ago you'd rather punch me than kiss me. So, what gives? Since when are you—" Jonathan's words died in his throat as he waved a hand in frustration, clearly unwilling to finish his sentence.

Steve still heard the unspoken word as clearly as Nancy's hitching of breath.

Queer?

The weight of the essays and articles and journals that Nancy withdrew from the library was ever-present in the forefront of his mind as he shrugged and muttered, "I dunno man, okay? This—this is all new to me," he paused, realising that he was rambling but unable to stop his runaway mouth, "I shouldn't have just laid one on ya like

that, I'm sorry I—"

"Don't be."

Steve's gaze shot up to meet Jonathan's, his eyebrows no doubt close to his hairline.

"What do you mean 'don't—" Steve broke off as movement over Jonathan's shoulder caught his attention. He watched as a familiar figure approached them, footfalls almost silent against the spring leaves.

"Will?" Steve called out in confusion, a frown creasing his forehead as Jonathan and Nancy turned simultaneously.

The boy seemed not to have heard him however, his carob eyes distant as he halted, a rigidity to his body and a vacantness to his features that set Steve's teeth on edge. Jonathan stood up, his face stricken as he approached his brother tentatively, much like a zoo-keeper would a wounded animal, his voice barely above a whisper, "Will? You okay?"

Will blinked rapidly, slowly turning his head to acknowledge his brother, his voice lacking its usual cheerful hilt, "Jonathan...uh, hi." He paused, seemingly only noticing the other two teenagers that had also stood but hung back to give the brothers space, "Hey Steve, Nancy. What are you guys doing here?"

The duo exchanged a quick glance, Steve shrugging, plastering his patented charming smile on his face, "we're playin' hooky, kid. Couldn't stand the thought of Spanish class on this fine Spring day, so...promise not to tell on us?"

Predictably, judging by his face, Will wasn't buying what Steve was selling, but like the awesome kid he was, he said nothing. Jonathan took that opportunity to softly touch his shoulder, murmuring quietly, "are you alone? I thought you were staying with Dustin?"

As if summoned, the sound of heavy footfalls and rustling leaves being kicked around reached their ears, just as a strangled and high-pitched voice called out, "Will? WILL!"

Steve watched as a mop of curly hair tried to escape from a red, white and blue baseball cap as Dustin Henderson bounced towards them, slightly winded as he leaned over to rest his palms on his thighs, catching his breath.

"H-Hey guys, Nancy," he toothlessly grinned at them, "uh, me and Will were just...walking..." the kid to seem to run out of steam half-way through his weak explanation and gave up, throwing his friend a helpless glance.

Will kept his eyes on Jonathan however, a determination crossing his stance as he squared his shoulders, "I'm fine, Jonathan. Really. I just...come here sometimes. I know I shouldn't but..." he sighed, breaking eye contact, "don't tell mom."

Steve now realised how Will must have felt listening to his lame excuse after lame excuse. It was clear to him that the younger Byers didn't just 'come here' at all and something else was definitely going on, but it wasn't his place to say anything. That distance, that sense of wrongness that he had been seeing in Will over the last couple of months was the strongest he had ever seen, as they all stood in the clearing, but he resolved to keep his mouth firmly shut. Instead, he watched as Jonathan's shoulders sagged, as if he was almost expecting this.

"Okay, man. Let's just...get you home."

He turned to Steve and before he could even muster a syllable, Steve was packing up his stuff and leading the way, "come on, lil Byers, Dustin. I'll give you guys a ride."

He could feel the weight of Jonathan's gaze on the back of his head as they all made their way to his car. As they reached it, he threw Jonathan the keys inclining his head towards his back pack where the bottle of whiskey lay inside. Wordlessly, Jonathan caught them, nodding, crossing over to the driver's side. Steve, Will and Dustin piled into the backseat as Nancy took shotgun, immediately turning on the radio once Jonathan started the ignition. Almost against his will, Steve caught Jonathan's gaze in the rear-view mirror, their eyes locking in a heavy understanding.

Whatever this was...it wasn't over.

Steve Harrington liked to think that he was an enigmatic man. Someone with a surprising set of skills, knowledge and interests that people may not have thought of him. With ever a desire for intrigue, he kept much of these attributes about himself close to the chest, but if there was ever a time to whip one of them out, so to speak, it was now.

"What are you making?" Nancy asked as she tried to peer over his shoulder at the frying pan that was sizzling on the stove.

"Never you mind, Wheeler," Steve winked, liking the gentle smile on her face that hadn't left since he said he would treat her to a home-cooked meal.

Jonathan had dropped them off in Steve's car, he and the boys heading back to the Byers', with a promise to return as soon as Joyce got home from work. None of the teens wanted to say it, but it was obvious something was not quite right with Will and his older brother was clearly concerned about him. An unease had settled in Steve's stomach when he saw the vacant expression on the young boy's face and even now as he stood in his kitchen over an hour later, he kept seeing that same empty look over and over in his head.

"How did I not know you could cook?" Nancy asked, checking his hip and knocking him out of his reverie.

Steve threw her a small grin as he stirred the sauce, adding a pinch of salt.

"What can I say, Nance? I'm full of surprises," he paused, inclining his head and winking, "gotta keep ya on your toes somehow."

"And here I thought you did that by kissing Jonathan Byers."

He stilled, spoon half-way to his mouth, his shoulders aching with tension. He let the spoon fall with a clank back onto the stove, turning to his girlfriend and levelling her with what he hoped was an apologetic look.

"About that, Nance," he began, forcing himself to maintain eye-contact, "I'm sorry I went about it like that. I...really didn't mean to just...*kiss him* like that. I don't know what I was—"

Nancy held up a hand, silencing him.

"I kissed him first, Steve. And besides, you're a man of action. I know that. I'm just glad that you're beginning to figure things out."

Figure things out? He wouldn't go that far. Steve knew it was possible to fuck more than one person at the same time. Hell, his dad's extensive collection of Betamax tapes proved that. But actually being in a relationship? With dating and romance and feelings? He could feel his face contorting at the implications.

Throwing up his hands in exasperation, he focussed on chopping onions, staring down at them as if daring them to sting his eyes, "yeah but, what about us, Nancy? We're a couple and—and I know you said that maybe we could all be happy. Me, you and Jonathan but—"

"You read the articles, didn't you?"

Steve threw her an affronted look, only to give up, his indignation deflating like a balloon, "I may have skimmed them when you were in the bathroom."

He didn't have to look at her to know she was rolling her eyes.

"They are just suggestions, Steve. Guidelines, advice. Not rules or laws. We—"

"It's weird, Nancy!" Steve cut in, his voice louder than he intended as he gripped the countertop, his back arching as he hung his head, words tumbling from his lips as he finally let all the pent-up frustration he had been feeling for what seemed like forever flow from him in waves.

"I've spent the last few months trying to talk myself out of this. Out of feeling anything. Told myself I was nuts, or it was just some side-effect of all the messed-up shit we went through. But now, here's you, the girl I'm in love with, telling me that at the same time, it's okay to

love another guy. It's fucking weird, okay? Weird and confusing and frustrating as hell and I just don't know what to do!"

A silence hung over them as he caught his breath, heaving heavy gulps of air as his hands shook, having turned a ghostly white from his tight grip on the counter top. Slowly, he inclined his head towards Nancy who was looking at him as if truly seeing him for the first time. Seemed as if his little outburst had rendered her speechless. But it wasn't the speechlessness that made a surge of ice crawl up Steve's spine – it was the expression on her face as her eyes left him and instead focussed on something over his shoulder.

"Love?"

You just can't catch a break, can you Harrington?

"I really am gonna have to get you a bell to wear around your neck, Byers."

He would not turn around, he couldn't.

He heard Jonathan step further into the room, dropping Steve's keys that he had used to let himself into the Harrington household, onto the side table. Nancy watched from over Steve's shoulder, minute changes occurring in her face as she glanced back at her boyfriend who felt as if every drop of blood had drained from his body.

"You told me to let myself in," Byers remarked, his voice still laced with a quiet shock, a hint of vulnerability that made Steve's stomach lurch, yet still with an undercurrent of defiance that had become coupled with him dealing with any of Steve's nonsense.

He could no longer form words. He wanted to concede that yes, he did tell Jonathan that. He wanted to give a snarky retort about cow-bell necklaces and knowing what to get Jonathan for his birthday. But most of all, he wanted to insist that Jonathan misunderstood him, that he wasn't actually talking about loving a guy, let alone him, no matter how implausible that may be. Instead, he focussed on the task at hand, preparing his grandma's famous paella and ignoring the elephant in the room. He had gotten damn good at it the last few months, what was another five minutes?

"Steve..." Nancy murmured, placing a hand on his elbow and tapping it gently, wordlessly coaxing him before gathering up some cutlery and making her way over to the table and beginning to set it, her back carefully turned to both boys, giving some semblance of privacy.

He refused to look up from the stove however, merely snatching up the salad bowl and shoving it into Jonathan's hands with a strained: "Make yourself useful, Byers."

Don't make a toss the salad joke. Don't make a toss the salad joke. DO NOT make a toss the salad joke!

Much like all the seemingly endless instances of late, he could feel the photographer's gaze on him, but wouldn't relent. Instead, he set about putting food on plates. That he could do without contemplating his sanity, considering jumping out the window, or pulling Jonathan towards him and giving him another demonstration of just what his mouth could do.

Goddamnit, Harrington. Are you even trying?

"Since when can you cook?"

Steve grabbed on to that snarky lifeline like a drowning man.

"Since I was five," he replied with an air of arrogance he knew rang false as he directed a smirk down at his caramelised onions, "contrary to popular belief Byers, I'm not just a pretty face."

Oh, for fuck's sake, Steve. Blow your own horn, much? Oh great. Now you're thinking about blowing—

"I know," Jonathan inadvertently cut across his inner tangent, an inscrutable look on his face and tone to his voice that Steve didn't understand but felt the weight of deep in his chest.

Almost without realising, he had broken his dogged avoidance of eye-contact and now stared right up at Byers' gaze as it shone with that same unfathomable gleam that he could never quite figure out.

Did he actually just compliment me? Have I fallen into some weird,

parallel dimension where Jonathan Byers praises me? Is was a nicer version of the Upside Down?

The Downside Up?

All the oxygen had evaporated from the kitchen. Somewhere on the outside of Steve's stunned impersonation of a gaping fish, he knew that he should say something, make a snappy retort that let the other boy know that he wasn't deeply affected by his simple but warm words, even though he sure as hell was. Yet before he could utter a sound, Jonathan cleared his throat, shrugging.

"You also got a mean swing with a bat," he continued with an air of nonchalance that Steve wasn't sure he believed, peeking over to where Nancy was finishing setting the table, pretending that she wasn't eavesdropping, his voice dropping a decibel as he finished, "you're not a bad kisser either."

A clatter of cutlery hitting plates jolted Steve from his paralysis, both he and Byers whirling around to Nancy who threw them a sheepish glance as she hurriedly righted her mistake. Steve raised his eyebrows at her, accidentally catching Jonathan's gaze again, his heart leaping in his chest at the mischievous look crossing it.

Jesus H Christ, Stevie Boy. What the hell have you gotten yourself into?

If he could bear to look at Jonathan closely, he would see the tenseness of his shoulders, the furrowed line between his eyebrows, the forced smirk on his face. But Steve glossed over it all, pretending that he didn't realise just how nervous the other boy was because someone was currently yelling his name.

"Steeeeeeven Harrington—come on down!"

His stomach lurched unpleasantly at the very familiar, if muffled tone. If God was real, Steve was pretty sure the big guy hated him.

"What is that?" Nancy asked, turning her head to the kitchen window where the hollering was wafting from.

The three teens huddled together, staring through the rectangular glass that faced out into the Harrington's back yard, revealing none

other than Tommy H and Carol standing poolside, the former posed on the diving board, arms spread out and head tipped to the sky as he continued to yell at the top of his lungs.

"COME ON, STEVEN. YOUR AUDIENCE AWAITS!"

Nancy gripped his elbow tightly, but Steve broke out of her grasp when he surged forward, storming over to the back door and wrenching it open with such a forceful yank that the smack of it hitting against the wall made Carol jump. He wasn't sorry.

"Oh Luke! Leia! Han!"

Steve didn't have to turn to know that Nancy and Jonathan were right behind him, poised for the fight that was undoubtedly coming. Tommy gave an elated grin that bordered on manic when he saw them, whooping and bouncing on the diving board so that the entire thing shook as he called out.

"There they are...Hawkins very own golden trio. You know, you really shouldn't leave the gate unlocked like that, Stevie boy," he smirked, his wide and cloudy gaze finding his ex-best friend, "and in case you were wondering, Harrington, you're Luke. As much as I don't wanna make Byers Solo, we both know you're just the right level of lame and creepy to be Luke. That and..." he waved his hand dismissively, pulling a face, "you're probably sick enough to wanna fuck a family member."

Steve's jaw clenched as he forced his voice to remain level, "what do you want, Tommy?"

Tommy let out a humourless laugh, hands shoved in his pockets as he jumped off the diving board onto the pavement, walking around the pool and halting a few feet from them.

"Just came by to see how your head's doin', princess," he smirked, exchanging a glance with Carol, "you sure went down like a little bitch. Thought Byers was gonna have to haul your ass to the ER."

A blur shot around Steve and shoved Tommy. Hard.

"You could have killed him you asshole!"

Tommy stumbled backwards, caught off guard as the 5'3", 106-pound girl barrelled into him with a power generated by raw fury, nearly knocking him to the ground.

"Nancy!"

"Aww," Tommy snorted as Steve and Jonathan both came to stand next to Nancy, "what's wrong, five feet o' heat? You mad I got the drop on your pussy boyfriend? Sorry—" He held up a hand as if to correct himself, "pussy *boyfriends*. You're fucking that freak too, right?" He gestured to Jonathan with a scowl. "Guess Steve was right. You really are a slut, Nancy Whee—"

Before either Steve or Jonathan could react, Nancy reared back her fist and punched Tommy square in the nose, a loud crunch, followed by a burst of blood cutting him off. Carol let out a scream as he fell backwards into the pool with a heavy splash, the water laced with a whirl of tell-tale crimson.

"You crazy bitch!" Carol yelled as she kneeled by the pool as Tommy resurfaced, outstretching her hand for Tommy to take, only to have him angrily bat it away, blood gushing down his face.

The sound of a camera shutter plunged them all into silence. With wide eyes, Steve slowly turned his head to regard Jonathan who was nonchalantly lowing his camera from where it had been pointed down at the couple, a smirk on his face. Forcing back a chuckle, Steve turned to Tommy, leaning down slightly, resting his hands on his knees.

"Wow, Tommy boy. Just what will Hawkins High think of their big, bad wrestling star getting knocked to his ass by a five foot, one-hundred-pound girl, huh?" He tilted his head, awaiting a response. When he got none, he took a step backwards.

"Yeah, that's what I thought. So, here's the deal," he rubbed his hands together, glaring from Tommy to Carol and back again, "you two, and all of your dumbass friends, leave us the hell alone. From now until graduation. No more threats, no more taunts, no more stealing or damaging our shit. Nothing."

He paused for dramatic effect. Because fuck it. He was enjoying himself.

"Or, Jonathan here plasters that pretty picture all over the school, the parking lot, hell, the fucking movie theatre, Benny's Burgers and football field while he's at it. So everybody in Hawkins can know just how bad Tommy Harris takes a punch from a girl half his size," he crouched down, catching Tommy's thunderous gaze and throwing him a wink, "sound fair, Palpatine?"

Carol let out a shrill noise that was half-way between a laugh and a cry as she glowered up at them, "nice bluff, asshole. Byers just got evidence of Wheeler breaking the law. She assaulted him! If you losers try anything, we'll go straight to the cops!"

Steve shook his head at her, marvelling just how little Tommy's so-called girlfriend could know about the guy she's meant to give two shits about.

"Oh, you mean how Tommy assaulted me and Byers? Or how you two are technically trespassing right now? That kinda breaking the law? That right, Tommy? You gonna turn Nancy in? Tell them all about how she knocked ya on your ass and broke your nose?"

If looks could kill, Steve would be on his way to the pearly gates right then and there. Or the fiery pits of the underworld. Who the hell knew at this point.

"Yeah," he nodded, straightening up and putting his hands back in his pockets, "that's what I thought. Now get the hell off my property."

Slowly, he turned on the spot, ever aware of both Nancy and Jonathan's gazes on him, "you guys go on in. I'll make sure they find their way out."

He waited several beats, long enough for Carol to scramble out towards the car and for Byers and Nancy to head towards the back door, before whirling back silently and stalking over to where Tommy was hauling himself out of the pool with a grunt.

"It didn't have to be like this you know."

He watched as his ex-best friend stilled, half-turned away from him.

"I never wanted it to be like this," he continued as he took another step, allowing the regret, anger and pain seep back into his tone.

"But you left me no choice, man. So, it is what it is," Steve shrugged, lowering his voice even further, until it was nothing more than a whisper, "and so help me, if you don't knock it off, don't leave me, Nance and Jonathan alone, I'll do a hell of a lot more than embarrass you with some pictures," he took one last step, now so close to him that his breath bounced off the other boy's cheek.

"I was your best friend for over ten years, Tommy. Way I see it, the only perk was that I got a lot more dirt on you than you ever got on me. Remember that."

Steve went to turn away from him, but Tommy's hand shot out, grasping his shoulder roughly as he spat, "really, Steve? You'd rather hang out with that...that...*fucking freak*...than me? He's...he's nothing but a white-trash psycho that—"

Steve shoved his hand off his shoulder, grabbing Tommy by the collar and growling, "Jonathan Byers is more man than you'll ever be. A better person than you could ever dream of being, and has made me a better friend and happier person than you ever did! So, *I swear to god*, Tommy," he paused, his teeth grinding as his jaw clenched painfully, "this is your last warning—leave us. The Fuck. Alone."

Without waiting for a response, Steve turned on his heel and followed Nancy and Jonathan, his new best friends, feeling a weight that he had been carrying on his shoulders for months now, finally lift from him. He was free of the prison that was Tommy Harris. Ready to live his life as his own person, on his own terms. And if he was lucky?

He could share it with a nerd and a weirdo that made him feel less alone than he had ever felt.

With a deep breath, Steve entered his house and slammed the door behind him. Nancy and Jonathan stood a mere two feet across the threshold, the former's hand cradled in the latter's, twin gazes

watching him. Silently, they all waited as the unmistakable sound of Tommy's car starting and pulling out of the Harrington's driveway at what must have been an alarming speed, reached their ears.

When the obnoxious revving of an engine could no longer be heard, Steve finally let out the breath he didn't realise he had been holding. As his shoulders sunk with relief, he murmured, "well, now that that's over, I gotta go lock the gate. Then dinner is—"

Jonathan surged forward, pulling Steve's head down to his level and swallowing the rest of his sentence with his lips. Steve froze for approximately a nanosecond before relaxing into the kiss, letting himself savour it, unlike their first. Jonathan's lips felt different than Nancy's, but just as pleasant. He was very aware that Nancy was still holding onto Jonathan's hand and could feel her beaming at them as the photographer gripped the back of Steve's neck with his other.

The taller boy suppressed a shiver as Jonathan's long fingers brushed against his skin, his tongue simultaneously licking at his bottom lip. Steve gasped, a heat pooling in the pit of his stomach as Jonathan broke the kiss that held so much promise, taking a step back and looking up at him with that same indistinguishable carob gaze that had been driving him steadily crazy for the past several months.

"What..." Steve swallowed, taking some deep breaths, "was that for?"

Jonathan merely gave a one-shouldered shrug, exchanging a look with Nancy who was barely suppressing a laugh, "just returning the favour, Harrington."

As their eyes met once more, Steve knew in that moment that Jonathan had somehow heard what he had said to Tommy. Just like he knew that neither of them would ever really acknowledge that he did.

"So...what was it you were saying about dinner?" Nancy broke the short silence that had engulfed them as the two boys stared at one another, each realising that all of their lives now hung on a precipice, never to be the same as they had been before, now that they had finally taken this leap into the deep, but not dark, unknown.

Steve chuckled at her, leaning forward and pecking her softly on the lips, "you get Jonathan to look at that hand, then we can think about dinner, Wheeler. I'm gonna go and lock up," he gestured behind him, walking backwards as he called to Jonathan, "I trust you to take care of our featherweight champion, Byers. Not that she needs it."

With that, he raced out to the backyard, a spring in his step as he dead-bolted the gate, shaking his head at the goofy grin he could feel spreading across his face. They may have to still have a conversation, many conversations about just what all this meant, the ins and outs of their new dynamic. But they had time for that. His grin only grew larger as when he walked back towards the house, he caught quite the sight through the window. Jonathan was tenderly cleaning Nancy's hand, mumbling something Steve couldn't hear, she leaning forward and kissing him, the two pulling away after a few seconds, identical smiles on their faces.

God, we're disgusting.

I love it.

Steve couldn't help but remember, only a year ago, when he first watched Nancy and Jonathan through a window and marvelled at how different he now felt. How he had once been filled with rage and jealousy and pain, and now only felt...happy. Happy and lighter than he could ever remember feeling. It would be a moment that he knew he would recall in years to come, anytime things got too much, or whenever he needed a pick me up. This moment would bring him back to earth. It was perfect.

BEEP. BEEP. BEEP. BEEP.

"Shit! My paella!"

Well. It was close enough.

It did not take long to realise that the duel-torture of Jonathan Byers' lips on his neck and Nancy Wheeler's lips on his chest was a sure-fire way to make Steve Harrington fall apart. It was something his subconscious had undoubtedly known, as those ever-so-helpful

dreams he had had for months had predicted, but nothing, no dream or fantasy, could quite prepare him for the reality.

"Fuck..." he gasped as Jonathan's teeth grazed his jugular, Nancy's nails scratching a trail down his abdomen.

"You asked me once why I took your picture."

It took Steve a few seconds to realise that Jonathan was talking to him, murmuring soft words into his skin.

"Uh...huh," he struggled to respond as Jonathan deftly squeezed him through his jeans, Nancy beginning to pull down the zipper, agonisingly slowly.

It had been seven months since...well, everything. Faceless monsters and alternate universes, kids coming back from the dead and others staying that way. It had been seven months since he and Nancy started going steady and he told Tommy H and Carol what he really thought of them. It had been seven months since he bought Jonathan Byers a new camera and everything...changed.

It had been three months since they all realised just what they meant to each other.

It had been two months since they first spent the night together in every meaning of the word, and Steve could still hardly believe it. But this right here, Jonathan and Nancy in his bed and teasing him so damn much, those fuckers, that was pretty believable by now.

What a world.

"Well, the truth is," Jonathan continued, almost conversationally as he ran his hand down the front of Steve's boxers, snapping him from his musings as his breath bounced against his ear, causing a rippling of goose bumps to rise all over his upper body, "I did it because...you just looked so...good. I took the picture before I really thought about it. And I don't regret it."

The words simultaneously sounded as if they were ripped from Byers against his will and a weighted confession that he couldn't wait to get off his chest, and Steve lapped up every syllable. He knew, at least for

now, it was as close as the photographer could get to a declaration.

"Careful, Byers," he grinned, his breath a little hitched as he finally met his gaze, "I'll start thinking you have a thing for me."

Jonathan snorted, "fuck you, Harrington."

"I thought that's what we were trying to do?"

Both boys turned to grin at Nancy's faux-unimpressed look, Steve leaning down and clasped her jaw, kissing her soundly, running his tongue across her bottom lip as she straddled his lap. He felt Jonathan's fingers move to his hair, burying themselves in his tresses and tugging with just the right amount of strength that caused a shiver to flow up Steve's spine.

Best. Birthday. Ever.

It was funny. Steve thought that after everything that had happened over the last few months, he would finally be used to waking up in a bed with Nancy Wheeler and Jonathan Byers either side of him. Yet, as he turned his head to the right and watched the moonlight spill over his girlfriend's ivory shoulder, then turned his head to the left to watch that same moonlight drape itself over his...*boyfriend's* hip bone, he didn't think it was something he would ever get used to.

"I know you're staring."

"You don't know shit."

Jonathan blinked open his eyes and to no one's surprise, met Steve's gaze instantly as he had in fact, been staring.

"You're an idiot, Harrington," Jonathan shook his head in exasperation, his tone noticeably a lot fonder than Steve was used to hearing when people said those words.

"Takes one to know one, Byers," he replied cheekily, laughing outright when Jonathan shoved him.

"You're both children," Nancy piped up, not bothering to turn to

acknowledge either of them.

Steve glanced over his shoulder with a smirk, "aww, what's wrong, Nance? Feeling like a third wheel...er?"

Nancy and Jonathan groaned in unison.

"I hate you."

Steve watched as his girlfriend sat up in the bed, her bare back gleaming in the moonlight as she stole Jonathan's shirt and pulled it over her head, her petite form swimming in the material as she hopped out of the bed and fixed them both with a faux-indignant look.

"Come on, we've got birthday cake to eat."

Steve shoved down the bubble of laughter that desperately wanted to claw up his throat as his brain flew straight to the gutter.

Don't say you've already ate. Don't say you've already ate. DO NOT say you've already ate!

"You make the stupidest face when you're trying to hold back a dirty joke, you know," Jonathan informed him with another shove, pulling on his boxers and mirroring Nancy, the two standing side-by-side, looking down at him.

Steve's eyes flickered from one to the other, a warmth spreading across his chest as he leaned up on his elbows, tilting his head at the pair.

"You know you love me."

Neither of them disagreed.

Steve rubbed his hands together gleefully as he put the popcorn down on the coffee table, smirking at Jonathan who was busy hooking up whatever movie it was that he was (not really) forcing Steve and Nancy to watch tonight. He stood admiring the firm line of Jonathan's shoulders for a few minutes (hey, he was allowed to now,

sue him), before leaning over and switching on his dad's radio.

I feel so unsure as I take your hand and lead you to the dance floor...

The dulcet tones of George Michael brought a smile to Steve's face as Nancy entered the living room, pizza in hand, her face pinched.

"Come on, Nance," he took the pizza with one hand and her fingers with the other, leading her to the couch, "sit down."

"What is this?"

Steve's grin widened at Nancy's tone, tilting his head to lay against the back of couch as she shifted closer to him, winding her arm across to rest on his abdomen, her head falling to his shoulder.

"It's the new George Michael song. You don't like it?"

He reached out to touch the little wrinkle that had formed between her eyebrows, his grin softening as she rolled her eyes at him.

"Why would she?" Jonathan piped up as he made his way over to them, remote in hand, taking his seat on the other side of Steve, pressed against him from thigh to toe, "you have the absolute shittiest taste in music, Mr-The-Olivia-Newton-John-Cassette-In-My-Car-Is-My-Mom's-Not-Mine."

Steve glared at Jonathan as he stretched his arm across his shoulder to rest on the back of the couch, his fingers brushing against the little sliver of skin not covered by Steve's T-shirt.

"Fuck you, Byers."

It had been seven months since the world flipped upside down.

It had been three since it, for the most part, righted itself again.

And Steve couldn't wait for what lay ahead.

The two shared a grin, Jonathan turning off the radio, settling back and catching Nancy's eye over Steve's head.

"This movie's awesome. The same guy who directed that new movie Mike and Will are obsessed with, *Ghostbusters* or whatever, directed it. You guys are gonna love it."

Steve and Nancy shared a look, both tickled at Jonathan's excitement as the former shrugged, "well, you know what they say," he winked, making himself comfortable in between the two people that meant the world to him, "stranger things have happened."

Annnnnnnnd that's all, folks!

I did initially intend to go a little more explicit with the sexy times, but as I considered the tone of the story, I felt just a hint of it was enough for this piece. Sorry if anyone is madly disappointed. I will consider writing more explicit smut pending any season two inspiration I may get. And I do have a little something (a bonus scene) left belonging to this story that I may add some time down the line, but as of now – Have Happened is done. I hope you all enjoyed it.

Wow, I had a blast writing this. Here's to season two. Who knows, it could spur me into writing more about these three losers ;)

~Ck xoxo